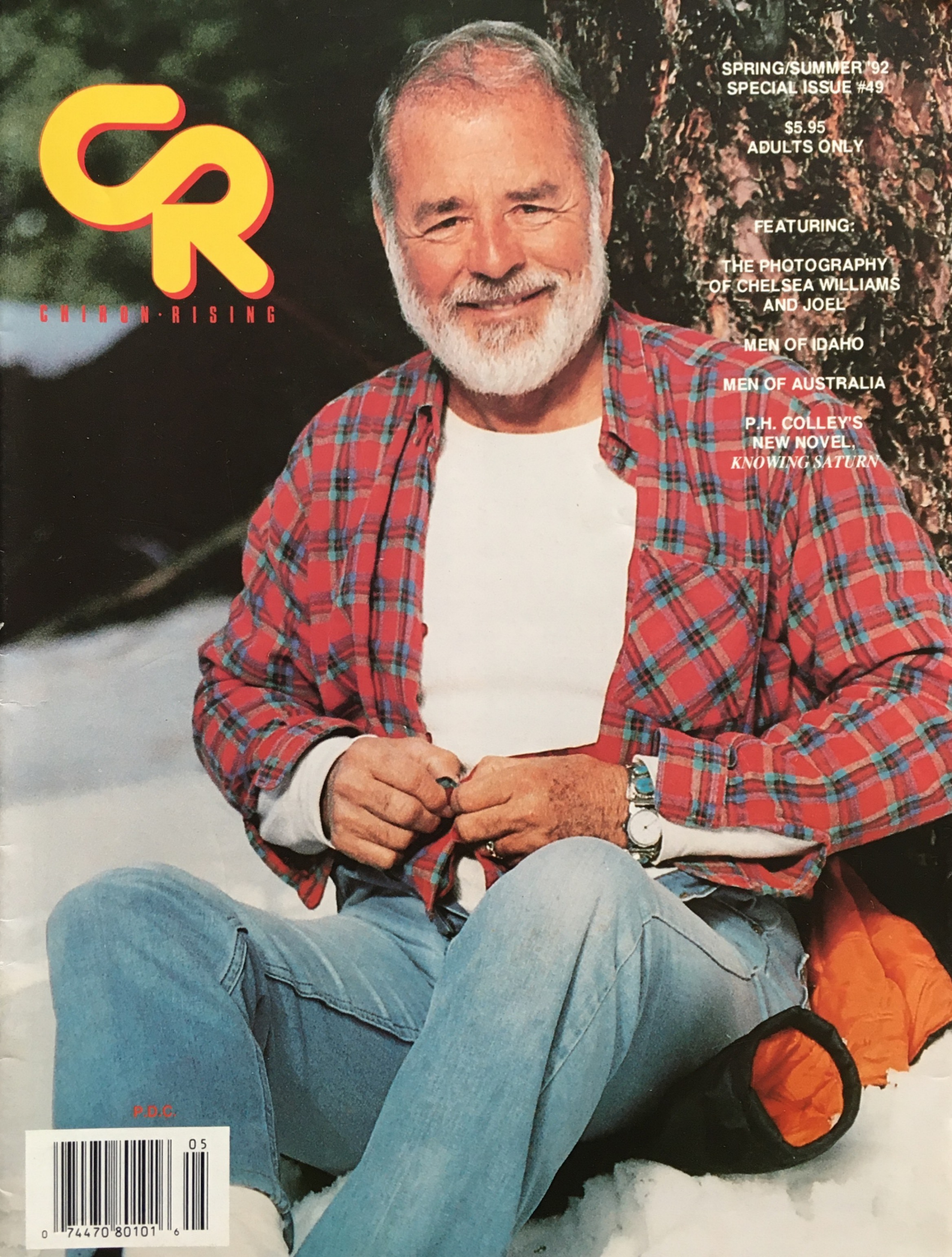
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SPRING/SUMMER '92
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MEN OF AUSTRALIA
P.H. COLLEY'S NEW NOVEL, KNOWING SATURN
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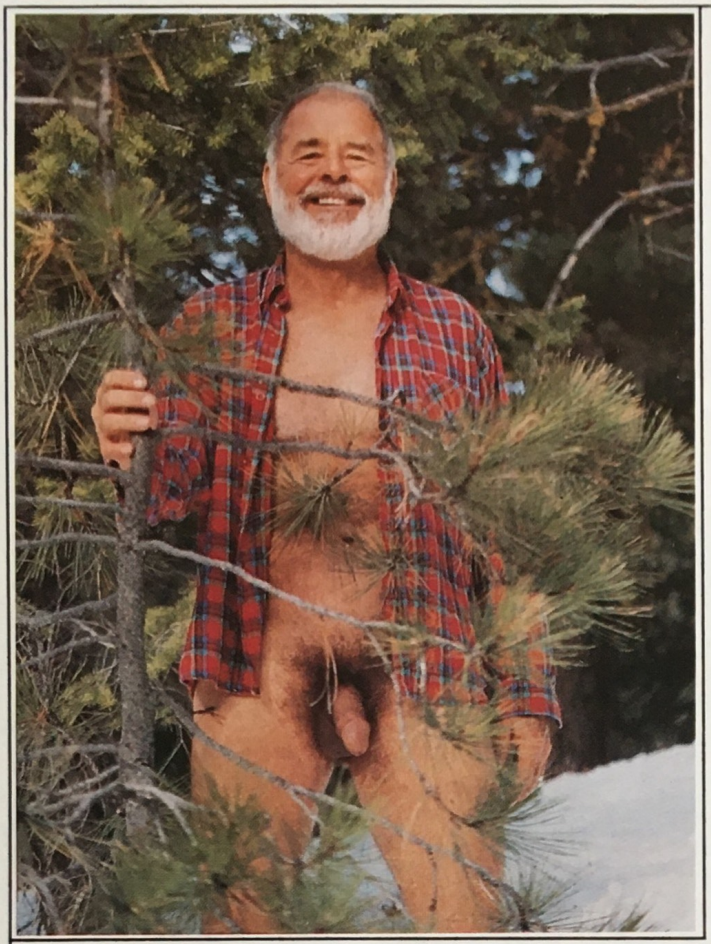
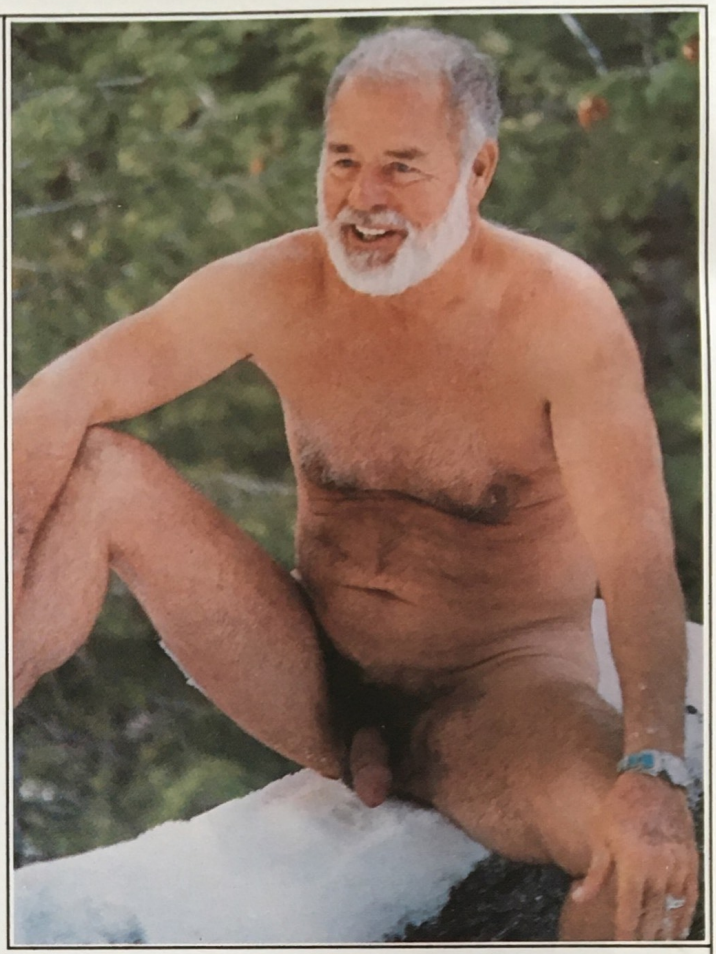
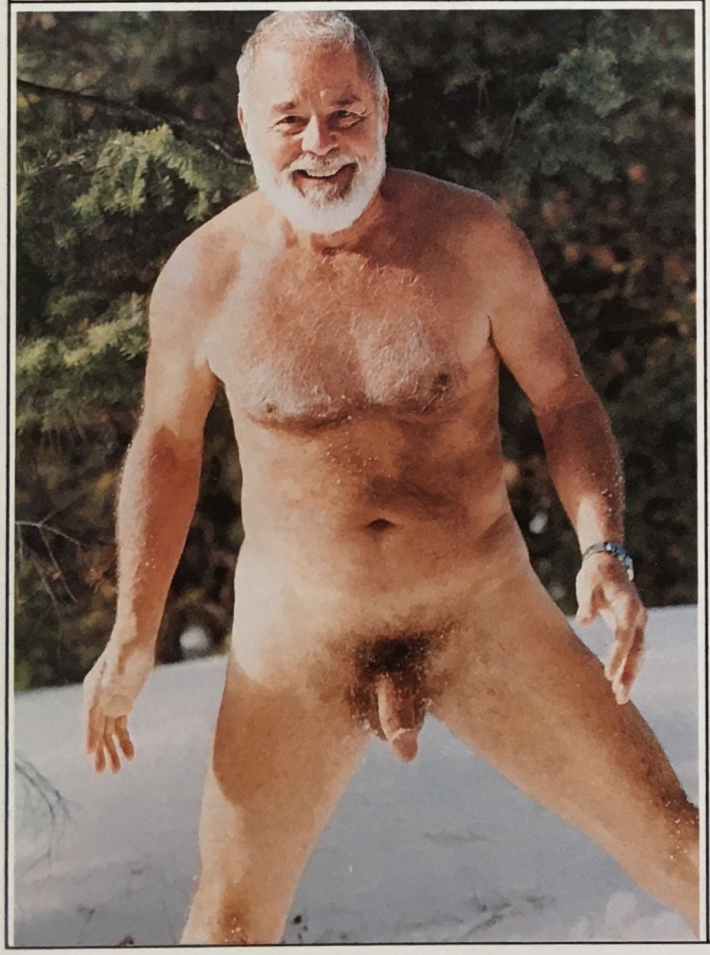
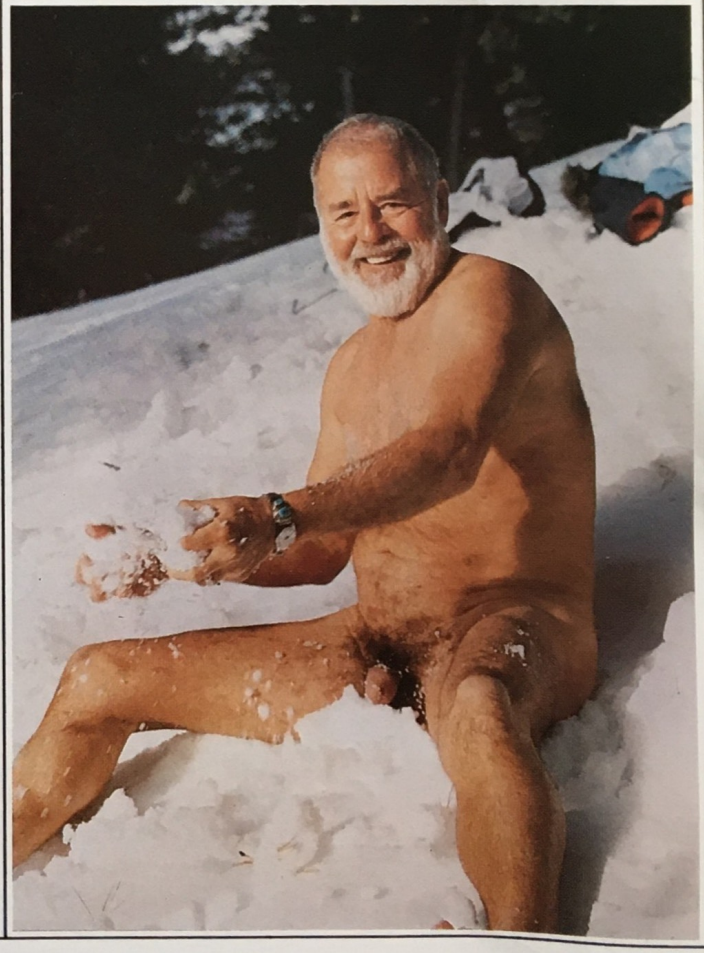




THOM . . . PHOTOS BY JOEL





This publication is in celebration of the mature, seasoned man in all his many sizes, colors and sexual orientations. Our goals:

1. To publish the finest adult entertainment of interest to the mature man and his many admirers.
2. To provide our supporters with a contact network so that they may enrich their lives with new friends, life-mates and a sense of renewed dignity and belonging.

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PUBLISHER/EDITOR
Patrick H. Colley

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Charles Chiarelli, The Friar,
Kenn Richie, The Viking

COFOUNDERS AND/OR PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTORS
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MODEL, PHOTOGRAPHER and ARTIST PROFILES

THOM, 69, is a semi-retired construction worker who has just joined photographer **JOEL** in the wilds of the great Northwest. Since their relationship is uniquely loving and open, THOM welcomes contacts by men such as himself, only under forty. Young JOEL, on the other hand, is anxious to meet rugged, mature men and especially wishes to find more models to immortalize in CR.

GARY THOMAS is a graphic artist who especially likes the challenge of logo design. He is 36 and has been a subscriber since 1988. GT lives in Washington State with his recently retired silver bear partner of 15 years.

MOUNTAIN MAN, another of JOEL's mature models, lives in the Idaho mountains, where he is a logger. MM likes to trek into the woods naked and will try anything once. Write him through JOEL.

THE NUDIST is 56, 5'-9", 175# and loves the nude and natural life-style. Summering in New Jersey and wintering in Palm Beach, he loves to travel, paint in water colors and meet/photograph new friends.

OUTBACK JACK is 46, 190#, 5'-10", hairy and lives in Australia. He's a delightful model, a great and funny guy, and he takes a mean photo, too. He took the photo of KOALA BEAR on the inside back cover.

RAY W., another Australian, is 50, lives alone with no ties, and welcomes visitors from anywhere. He relates to guys of all ages and races and is passively into most scenes. He also welcomes pen-pals.

MICHAEL is in his late 40s and lives in San Francisco. He travels quite a bit on business and is therefore free to meet his fans on the road, provided they are over 50.

CHELSEA WILLIAMS of San Francisco is among the top professional photographers in the world and is one of our most loyal supporters. If you'd like to make the cover of CR, write to us and we'll put you in touch with him.

GARY is 61, retired and going stronger than ever. According to his 33-year-old companion, perhaps he's going a bit too strong. His motto: Enjoy life and everyone you have the chance to meet. He lives in Idaho.

J.J. II is semi-retired from the travel industry and lives in San Francisco. He's quiet yet outgoing . . . and all man. He enjoys the company of mature, hairy men.

JOHN OF AUSTRALIA is the third of four Australians featured in this issue. He's hung like a cannon and likes to correspond with mature guys from all over on any subject.

BAREKAT, a Southern Californian, is 55, 6'-1", 235#, rugged, masculine, a nonsmoker and a nudist. He's partial to fair blonds younger than himself, but he's interested in meeting any younger man, any race, who is well-proportioned.

RAY T. is a versatile Daddy, 46, who is into bear types. He likes some S & M and delights in living in the nude around rugged Idaho.

(Continued on page 53)

KNOWING SATURN

a novel by
Patrick H. Colley

ONE

A village near Chiang Mai, Thailand, October, 1961

A group of Buddhist monks watched as my cousins finished putting together the two pyre foundations, each four by seven feet. I sat on a tree stump nearby, still in a daze. None of it seemed real to me.

The various hues of orange in the monks' robes strangely fascinated me. It was so soothing to stare unfocused into the orange pattern and allow the distant trumpeting of working elephants to hypnotize me into oblivion. I willed my spirit to take wing and fly into the jungle, sparing it the ordeal ahead.

A shrill beckoning call came from some woman inside my aunt's house nearby. I looked up and met the gaze of a monk, who glanced at the house then back at me. He showed no emotion, and I suppose there was none in my expression either. Perhaps that was why he was staring at me. After all, my loss was great.

As I became aware of other people around me, the monks quietly walked to the house and disappeared inside. The others walked by me and nodded in respect. Soon they became a blur as I tuned them out. A man with a familiar voice said something to me in Thai, and I nodded, not really hearing him.

The monks began to chant and led a procession out of the house toward the pyres. My younger cousins carried the first fabric-wrapped body and placed it on one of the platforms. It appeared too small to be my mother. Following close behind, my uncles carried a larger shrouded form and placed it upon the second platform. I stood up and walked closer for one final good-bye.

Other family members approached with arm-loads of banana leaves and covered the two bodies, forming one large funeral pyre. As my tears diffused the image, the still-chanting monks lit candles and began marching around the mound, creating a surrealistic image of dancing lights reflecting off the green of the banana leaves. I wiped my eyes and watched as the monks walked twice around the structures. Then, on the third pass, a monk pitched his candle atop the vegetation, prompting all the other monks to follow suit as they completed their third circle.

Shortly, the flames became intense and reached up into the sky. A line of people passed by me, some touching me gently. Some hugged me and offered comforting words.

Hours later, as I stared out of the window of the small house, the chanting monks walked around the ashes and bones another three times, then walked off into the night together. As was the custom, my mother's sisters and brothers sifted through the ashes and collected remnants of bones to keep as cherished mementos. An aunt offered me a small bone from my mother's corpse, but I declined. Instead, I walked to the still-warm remains of my father and allowed his ashes to sift through my fingers.

"Can you walk in his shoes?" asked my mother's oldest brother in English. He'd been standing in the shadows.

"No," I said simply.

"What will you do?"

"Go back to school in New York."

He squatted and glanced at the pile of ashes. "And when you finish? You get your degree next spring."

I shrugged. "Probably stay there." I tried to gauge my uncle's reaction, but his expression was impassive, like that of the monk. "At least for a while," I continued, lying.

"You won't take your father's position?" He didn't seem surprised.

I shook my head.

"We love you, Pring. We are the only family you have."

"I know."

He smiled warmly. "You inherited pleasing features from your mother, but you are restless, mysterious . . . like your father. You are Thai; you are American. You have a foot in two worlds."

I looked around the small village. "I don't know if this is my world here. Maybe I have to find myself."

"Yes, you have to find yourself . . . but *we* have to go on."

"Then *you* walk in his shoes." I looked at him. He was stocky and distinguished-looking—always my favorite in so many ways.

"How much do you want for your shares?"

I shook my head sadly. "Uncle . . . I have the trust funds, the insurance. That's all I need. The business belongs to the family. I'll sign everything in Bangkok tomorrow."

He stared at me in disbelief as I turned away from him and walked to a rock overlooking the lights of Chiang Mai. I sat on it and wept over the tragic, senseless loss of my mother and father.

TWO

New York, August 7, 1968

Riding uptown in the taxi, I began to feel anxious again. The summer had become boring. It was too quiet around me, and I felt as if I'd been trapped inside a vacuum. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy that spring had left me numb. The war raged on in Vietnam, and there were bloody demonstrations, but I stayed away. I wanted to escape the madness and sought oblivion. Instead I found restlessness.

I thought of my best friends, Denise and Tony. Had it not been for them, that restlessness would have lured me into doing things I normally avoided, like hanging out in subway toilets, baths and the back rooms of bars.

I'd met Tony one Friday night the previous winter in the Menemsha bar on Fifty-seventh Street. I immediately spotted him, because he looked half-Asian like me and appeared to be near my age. Except for his slightly shorter height, flamboyant mannerisms and mischievous expression, we looked incredibly similar. Later, I found that we had the same taste in men when we both began cruising a distinguished, grey-haired man who seemed unable to keep his eyes off either of us. The stocky,

masculine man, obviously incapable of making a choice, invited us both to his upstate summer cottage in Pawling for the weekend. Impetuously accepting the invitation, we followed the man outside to an illegally parked Jaguar sedan. He turned out to be a senior vice-president with one of the largest advertising agencies in the world.

Bart, our V.I.P. host, adored young Asians, so we gave him the time of his life. By Sunday morning, however, all of us had begun to feel the effects of overindulgence in liquor and sex. I was therefore relieved when Bart announced that he had to go to a chic, blue-blood party that night and couldn't take us along. While Bart was away, Tony and I sat before the fireplace sipping brandy and telling our life stories. His mother was Italian and his father was Thai, and we found it odd that we looked so similar, given our parental differences. He admitted to being a male prostitute and an independent drug dealer in his younger days. Unfortunately, he'd stepped on too many Mafia toes and was almost beaten to death. Upon recuperating, he became a bartender at an East Side French restaurant. Because of that weekend, we became the best of friends, and I pretended not to notice his gradual re-entry into the world of dealing drugs. After all, I was an occasional user of marijuana, and he was my source. Everyone I knew did recreational dope in those days—except for Denise.

Denise, a very attractive brunette who seemed to radiate with *savoir-vivre*, didn't consume anything more wicked than a rare cocktail on special occasions or wine during a meal. She'd been a fellow journalism major and graduated with me at Columbia. While I was having a fling at modeling, she had started from the bottom at the *New York Globe* and clawed her way up to the astrology columnist spot. She was always doing my astrological transits and continually giving me advice on what and what not to do. One day in 1966, she told me that, from July to December of 1968, my life would go through some radical, profound and irreversible changes. She said that I would meet someone I'd loved in another life—someone I've waited for all this life. "The Venus transit will come first, followed by the transits of Saturn, Pluto and finally Jupiter," she said. "I don't expect you to believe all this now, but you will when it starts. Trust me."

I didn't believe a word of it, but strange things began to happen.

The first incident took place inside a subway toilet after midnight. I'd had to urinate badly and figured that I wouldn't encounter anyone, but I did—a junkie with a knife. Fortunately for me, I also had a knife: a formidable switchblade that I'd bought after being mugged a couple of years earlier. The standoff ended as he wisely realized that he was too sick to take me, especially after I lied that I was a black belt.

The second incident was about to take place. Tony had invited me to accompany him to a dinner party but called at the last minute and told me to meet him at the party, that he would be delayed.

The cab pulled into the circular driveway of a posh apartment building on 77th and York. As I paid the cabbie, someone opened the door for me. I hopped out and found myself being inspected by a traditionally dressed doorman, who directed my cab driver to quickly move on to make way for a Rolls Royce. I went through a revolving door into a luxuriously decorated lobby, complete with massive chandeliers, thick carpeting, fountains and leather couches and chairs. Another doorman stationed at an intercom switchboard looked at me haughtily.

"To see . . . ?"

"Uhh . . . Maxon," I said, distracted by one of the chandeliers.

"Your name, sir?" he asked disdainfully, staring at my T-shirt, upon which was inscribed: "Hung Thai."

"Davidson . . . uhh . . . you'd better say, 'Tony.'"

The man turned and dialed a number, looking at my T-shirt once more while he waited. "Mister Maxon? I have a . . . a *Tony* in the lobby . . . . Yes, sir."

The doorman directed me to a bank of elevators and gave me Maxon's apartment number on the twenty-ninth floor. I was inside the apartment no more than five minutes when I realized that I should have stayed home.

So there I sat, trying to carry on a conversation with four very strange people with whom I had absolutely nothing in common. Worse, they were all dressed in coats and ties and I was wearing jeans and provocative T-shirt. I couldn't wait to leave.

"I can't hold back much longer," announced the younger of the hosts, a fresh-out-of-Princeton editor for a book publisher. "The roast will dry out."

"I wonder what happened to Tony?" whined his lover, a fiftyish, balding creative director for a huge advertising agency. "Maybe you should call and see if he's all right," he suggested to me.

"I did when I went to the john a couple of minutes ago," I said, knowing full well that Tony had been distracted and probably forgot about the party. "There was no answer. He said earlier that he might be a little late and that I should come on up and introduce myself. This is very embarrassing." I glanced at the other couple, a middle-aged Broadway producer with his subdued twenty-year-old "slave."

"Wasn't Tony supposed to bring . . . *dessert*?" asked the producer.

"Yes," answered the younger host, becoming increasingly irritated with each passing minute. He abruptly walked toward the kitchen. "And I was really looking forward to it."

I knew, of course, that "dessert" meant cocaine and that Tony was their regular supplier.

"Maybe he'll still show," said the ad man, joining his lover in the kitchen. "Let's wrap the roast in foil and turn the heat down."

The producer looked at me hungrily, as he'd done the whole time since my arrival. "Are you a model?"

The quiet "slave" asked for and received permission from the producer to go to the bathroom. He glared at me as he walked by, and I could see that he was very jealous.

"Was," I corrected. I didn't want to be in the room alone with him. Something about him made me feel uneasy.

"You're a Scorpio, aren't you?"

"Why, yes." *Lucky guess*, I reasoned.

"You want to get together some time?" he asked softly, looking nervously for the others, obviously wanting to set something up for later.

"I prefer not to get involved with guys who have lovers." I tried to say it pleasantly. "Besides, I'm not into master/slave scenes."

"You're incredibly beautiful." He looked at my T-shirt. "Are you Thai?"

"Half," I said, leaning forward in preparation for flight.

"Ah, Eurasian. How exotic."

"Amerasian," I corrected. "My father was American."

He nodded, then lightly licked his bottom lip. "You

hardly have an accent. Are you really hung, like it says on your shirt?"

"Not really," I said, glancing around for the others. I felt that I needed rescuing.

"I see your aura," he said urgently. He seemed to look through me. "It's sort of an ethereal *wreath*." His eyes took on more intensity. "It's like a halo, an annular eclipse. Your head eclipses Saturn, and I'm in the umbra."

I heard a commode flush, and the conversation in the kitchen indicated an imminent return to the living room.

The producer's eyes became searing. "Behind it is a raging electrical storm . . . darkness . . . rumbling thunder."

"Uh, I'd better . . . " I began, then noticed the others entering the room.

The producer seemed unaware of the others. "Do you know what sadomasochism is all about? I mean *really* what it's about? Most faggots don't, really. They think it's just a matter of inflicting or receiving pain. But it's not . . . it goes so much deeper than that."

The others stared at him but kept silent. His lover/slave slowly sat next to him, looking alternately at me, then at him. He seemed very concerned, and I got the feeling that this sort of behavior had happened before.

"It has to do with ultimate dominance, mind control, rapturous pain—both mental and physical." He squinted at me. "In you, I see silver lights emanating from your eyes, like celestial lasers," the producer continued. "So hot . . . so hot. Do you know they're there?" His voice had become lower, hoarse. "Has anyone ever told you that before? I suppose not, because you haven't met the right man to bring it all out. How old are you? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?" He closed his eyes, as if to conjure up more information on me.

"Twenty-seven," I murmured, glancing around at the shocked expressions of the others.

"Baby?" his lover said softly, breaking the silence.

"Where'd he get the acid?" the balding man quipped, trying to crack the spell.

"He sees things," the young man explained, placing his hand on his master's shoulder. "Sometimes he sees things in people."

The man's eyes popped open. "Your have that scent that drives men like me into a frenzy." The producer sniffed the air and looked around the room, his eyes bulging, his mouth leering. "Do you know what ultimate sex is? Do you?"

I shook my head, slowly rising.

"Snuff sex . . . suffocation." He smiled hideously. "Cumming just at the point of death."

"Ron, please! Come out of it!" yelled his young lover, shaking the man's shoulders.

I got to my feet and began to back toward the foyer.

"Picture it!" The producer boomed. "You lie writhing as a big fucking arm pushes up your colon like a trapped snake and breaks through to your heart and squeezes it . . . squeezes it until it collapses!"

"Will you get the hell out of here?" the lover pleaded with me.

The producer suddenly turned and viciously slapped the younger man again and again.

I ran out of the apartment and frantically pressed the elevator button, looking warily back toward the apartment. As I got on the elevator, I could hear screams, scuffling, and the sound of breaking glass.

Although I almost totally abstained from drugs and alcohol—except for an occasional joint or a couple of drinks—I was, by virtue of my age, surrounded by the drug culture of the sixties. Practically everyone I knew under thirty smoked grass, and many of them got into heavier things like cocaine, hashish, hallucinogens, speed and heroin. Consequently, it was no big thing to see someone who had obviously overdosed. But the producer had really upset me. Was he on acid, or did I really affect him that way? The experience unsettled me; I couldn't stop trembling during the trip by subway to the West Village.

On the way to my apartment, I stopped inside a tavern where a bartender sold weed by the joint. Buying one, I smoked it as I strolled home, hoping that it would calm me down and allow me to sleep. By the time I reached my studio apartment door, my body had ceased trembling, and I felt a pleasant numbness. The night was unseasonably cool, and I opened the windows rather than rely on air conditioning. My hide-a-bed felt unusually comfortable, as if the mattress had been replaced by a lilting pool. I felt myself slowly spiraling while floating serenely on my back. I was being drawn into the peripheral currents of a massive whirlpool and didn't fight it. I welcomed it, because such a prelude usually brought on another of my recurring "white room" dreams.

I sat in lotus position on a glistening, white floor, staring up at a huge console. Everything was white and modular. Everything was so very clean. I wondered if the console was a futuristic concert synthesizer. I wondered if I had been the first to arrive for some bizarre recital.

The console came to life and there was an explosion of tiny lights. Feeling beckoned, I approached the console, letting my fingers glide over a typewriter keyboard in the center of it. I sat on a soft, modular stool and began communicating with the machine.

WHERE AM I? I typed.

A color hologram appeared on the screen, showing a man treading water with only his head exposed. He was positioned in the center of a moonbeam reflection, and a setting moon appeared as a halo behind him. Far in the distance, an electrical storm was raging.

WHAT IS THE SYMBOLISM? I typed.

I heard a crackling sound from the white wall to my left and watched as a pattern extruded from the wall. It was massive and slowly took on the form of a man-like creature . . . only it was no man. It was a great ape, pushing through the flexible wall, its features veiled by a thin layer of plastic-like substance. The material ripped, exposing a brilliant eye with a shiny black pearl of a pupil and a golden iris.

Violently, the beast tore through and stood before me, looking down at me with hunger spelled in radiant eyes. Unafraid and just as hungry, I marvelled at the sight of a huge, white orangutan stroking a turgid, human-like penis.

"Umbalaga pragadan," *the beast said in a soft, mellifluous voice. The language sounded like some tribal Malasian dialect.*

"Umbalaga pragadan," *I repeated, crawling toward him, lured by a glistening rivulet of precum.*

As I reached him, he playfully pulled his penis out of reach and faded back into the wall. A momentary bulge soon

settled into the plane of the wall, which now showed no trace of him except for a drop of clinging syrupy liquid. I smelled it, then tasted it, finding it exotic . . . something one would expect from the prostate of a grand beast.

I heard a clicking sound and turned toward the console.

Blurred images appeared on the screen, then sharpened. I saw my father and mother walking in front of a Buddhist temple in Bangkok. A five-year-old version of me was riding joyfully atop my father's shoulders.

Events of my childhood sped by like segments from a fast-motion newsreel.

And then I was falling slowly through clouds. Breaking through them, streaks of morning sunlight blinded me, directing my gaze below, where vibrant-green, jungle-covered peaks rose through a blanket of mist.

My father's corporate jet streaked under me, bound for a meeting with Laotian tin miners in Vientiane. On board were my father and my mother, who had come along only to visit her sister across the border in Nong Khai, Thailand.

A single surface-to-air missile came up from the mist like a Great White shark speeding through murky water. There was an explosion, and the flaming aircraft lazily fell into the dense jungle below.

The piercing sound of my telephone awoke me, and I realized that I was crying. It was the first time I had been awakened abruptly from such a dream, and I found the memory so much more vivid than before. I squinted at the illuminated time on my clock-radio and composed myself. "Hello," I said, clearing my throat.

"You bitch!" yelled Tony, a female residing inside a male body.

"It's twelve forty-five and I was sound asleep, which makes *you* the bitch!" I countered.

"I have been waiting in this cesspool of a leather bar for over an hour. You are reminded that it was your idea to come here."

I groaned. "It was my idea to meet you there next *Friday* night, not tonight. Tonight was the dinner party you obviously forgot about."

"This *is* Friday night, or should I say Saturday morning," insisted Tony, his voice suddenly losing its edge. "What dinner party? What day is this?" he asked someone nearby.

"Tuesday, the twelfth of never," someone whined.

"Thursday morning!" boomed a deeper voice.

Tony was silent.

"Good night," I said, hanging up.

At four o'clock, the telephone rang again, interrupting a semiconscious attempt to induce an erotic dream.

"I'll bail you out this afternoon," I mumbled. "Get some sleep."

"Pring?" A female voice.

"Oh, hello, Denise," I said, yawning.

"Who's in jail? Tony?"

"Probably. What's wrong?"

"A reminder. Transiting Venus and a full moon will exactly conjoin your ascendant tonight at eight o'clock."

"I'm going to conjoin you with a full enema bag . . . "

"This is serious. Wake up and get out of bed."

"It's four o'clock," I moaned, feeling an approaching headache.

"Go to the roof at sunrise and face the east."

My head began to throb. "I'm going to hang up now, Denise."

"You'll receive a sign. This powerful psychic I know says that you'll receive a sign if you face the east at sunrise."

"Good-bye, Denise."

"It's time, Pring. *He's* coming."

My headache suddenly drifted away and I sat up in bed. *He's coming*?

"Are you awake now?"

"Yes," I said, crawling out of bed.

"Good," she soothed. "Now remember. You're psychically and physically in heat, so you'll probably attract all kinds of people. Remember everything I've told you. Don't let the carnivores taste you. Stay away from beasts."

"Yes, Mommie."

"If this is just so much bull shit, then why are you wide awake and destined for the roof?"

"Who says I'm on the way to the roof?"

She chuckled and disconnected.

Standing atop my roof sipping coffee, I felt self-conscious and almost talked myself out of it. I would have, had Denise not been so accurate with her predictions in the past. (Had she not predicted my near-fatal mugging?) There were a few clouds, and all the buildings to the east became a complex geometric silhouette against a brilliant backdrop of orange, pink and violet. To the west, the moon was sinking fast. Then, the ascending red arc of the sun rose and moved me as never before. The powerful sound of Poulenc's *Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani* wafted over the rooftops from some mad person's apartment blocks away. The wail of sirens came from the East Village, distorting Poulenc.

I heard a faint scraping noise, followed by the sound of heavy breathing. It reminded me of the time I had gone on an outing with a group of rock climbers in California's Mojave Desert. I had opted to be the keeper of the safety cord, which was securely tethered to a large boulder near the ledge upon which I sat. Just as I'd waited for the first face to appear over the precipice then, I found myself doing it now.

The breathing became less human and more feral. It sounded as if some animal was attempting to scale the wall of my apartment building. Fearfully, I backed away from the edge of the roof and cowered against a huge air conditioning unit.

There was a heavy grunt, but it seemed like a summons. Whatever it was paused.

I shivered in terror.

The climbing continued in earnest, as if the beast had received a renewed burst of energy. The grunts were now almost howls.

"No!" I cried out, wanting it to go away.

"Umbalaga pragadan." A deep, strained voice.

But strangely, the voice calmed me, and my mind began to receive a stream of symbols. The word "karma" lingered with me.

A heavy arm covered with white hair fell over the short wall ringing the roof. The leathery simian hand was bleeding. *I must help him!* I thought, rushing to the wall, but in despair, I saw his arm slip from my grasp.

With dread, I looked down at the street but saw only parked cars and dirty sidewalks. Something caught my eye,

and I turned to find a piece of newsprint with a black and blood-red display ad in the corner. Then the wind blew it from the corner of the roof and sent it wafting.

"I'm hallucinating," I whispered. "I'm losing my mind. Damn you, Denise."

Yet, I felt an exotic presence of someone, something on the roof with me, and I spun around. But nothing was there. I cursed my subconscious mind for taunting me with recurrent dreams and hallucinations. I questioned my sanity.

As I rushed to the roof-access door, a soft wind swirled about me, caressing my face, sending the aroma of beastly rut into my nostrils.

I charged down the stairway. "No," I insisted to myself. "Simply auto-suggestion. Denise is full of shit. I will not meet someone tonight who will change my life. I will not meet *him* at eight o'clock."

THREE

Thursday Evening, August 8th

The full moon was brilliant. The evening seemed charged with a sexual electricity. I was hungry for sex, and experience had taught me that, on such nights among the crazies, there was a good chance of finding choice "beef."

I cruised Washington Square and found it brimming with fringe groups. A Puerto Rican gang performed electrifying salsa on steel drums, bongos and gourds, as their less-musically inclined members sifted through the crowd, selling drugs and picking the pockets of the ones who weren't buying.

I headed west and began cruising Christopher Street. Up ahead I could see a crowd gathering in front of a popular bar normally patronized by the more trendy gays. There was no reason to go there, I reasoned, because the customers would all be young guys like me.

I considered the leather bars down the street and on West Street. Beyond that, I thought of—then rejected—the idea of cruising the empty truck trailers near the docks. I knew that I'd have to be drunk for that scene, and I had to work the next day. So much for Venus on my ascendant.

As I walked toward my apartment around 9:30, I sensed a powerful attraction to a small leather bar I had visited only once before. For reasons I couldn't fathom, it was Tony's favorite. Finding the bartenders rude and the clientele boring, I had vowed never to return—even with Tony. Why then was I irresistibly pulled inside this evening?

Sure enough, nothing had changed. An extremely effeminate bartender with studded leather arm bands looked through me. "What'll it be, honey?"

"A Scotch on the rocks . . . and my name isn't *honey*. Okay?"

That got me a focused look. "I *see* it isn't," he lisped, pouring Scotch into a small, ice-filled glass. Smiling in self-satisfaction, he danced away.

Left with my drink and a desire to void my brain of all anxiety-causing thoughts, I felt a kind of peace. Soon I was deep in thought, plotting out a delicious fantasy with a burly, older man. An attractive face appeared, and I congratulated myself on my powers of concentration. Then it dawned on me that the face was real.

The brush with the man's gaze was akin to glancing at something forbidden—something no mortal could grasp. It was like that weird, omnipotent feeling I sometimes experience upon awakening: the sense that I had just passed through the core of collective intelligence and suddenly knew all the answers, only to feel like my usual uninformed self seconds later.

I'd not seen him come into the bar and was so shocked to see this gorilla of a man sitting on the barstool next to me that my swizzle stick fell out of my mouth. I could actually feel his body temperature and sensed a tingling sensation rising over my body. Late fortyish and burly, he was dressed in a black leather vest with a biker cap. His hands, arms and bare chest were huge and covered with thick, dark hair. His face was clean-shaven, and his hair seemed to be short and conservative. He ordered a vodka on the rocks, revealing a soft, resonant voice with a mild local accent.

I picked up the swizzle stick and absently placed it back inside my mouth.

He turned and smiled at me with friendly tan eyes. "Hi."

I blushed and felt as if my facial muscles had ceased to function. A blur of emotions crossed my mind like at no other time in my life. I felt inordinate joy tinged with sadness. I saw unintelligible remnants of alien memory, yet somehow sensed it had to do with fate, the future.

"Hi," I struggled to say, trying to find my own charm. After all, only three years had passed since I had been on the cover of a major magazine and one of the most sought-after models on Madison Avenue. I was a stunningly handsome Amerasian and usually it was I who made an admirer's facial muscles slacken.

"You don't remember me, do you?" The leatherman shook his head good naturedly and extended his wide hand. "Mario."

I shook his hand and instantly felt a profound bond. It wasn't deja vu or something as mundane as the simple memory of meeting someone months or years ago. I was certain that I'd never met him before, at least not in my present life. The contact with his skin produced a flash, a preview of something big that was about to happen.

"You're Tony." Mario smiled, exposing a dimple. "See, I remember your name."

I didn't have the presence of mind to correct him. For this man, I would be Elmer Fudd if need be.

The swishy bartender, standing nearby, turned and appeared on the verge of saying something, but a sharp glance from me preempted it.

"Normally, I wouldn't forget a man like you," I said. "Where did we meet?"

"At a party in Queens. I'm Nick Soleriani's brother."

I wondered if I should continue the charade or tell Mario who I really was. But my overpowering desire to get this man into bed overrode rational behavior. Since Tony was half-Thai also, we were often confused for the other. "Oh, now I think I remember."

The bartender shook his head in disgust and walked away.

"You were pretty stoned that night," said Mario.

"I could never be so stoned as to forget going to bed with a man like you," I boldly said.

Mario's expression lost a touch of friendliness. "You didn't make it with me. God, you really *were* out to lunch."

Instinct told me to back off, but my attraction was too intense. "So fill me in."

"Nick . . . uhh . . . *invited* you to meet Ricco Bonacci."

"Oh, yeah," I faked. *Oh, no! About face. Too much Italian here. Sounds too Mafia.* "Uh, Mario," I faltered. "As a

matter of fact . . ."

"Nick needs your services again."

" . . . you have the wrong guy, uh . . ."

Mario smiled and noticed the bartender staring. "Sorry. Let's go some place quiet so we can talk."

I watched the most attractive man I'd ever met slip off the barstool, and I couldn't keep my tongue from hanging out. Mario followed my gaze to his ample crotch and smiled knowingly. He placed a heavy, muscular arm around my shoulders and gently urged me off my bar stool. With his other hand, he placed a twenty on the bar.

Outside, Mario nodded toward a side street. "I'm parked about three blocks away."

I stopped on the sidewalk and shook my head. "Please forgive me. As much as I'd love to play along and eat you up alive, I'll have to be honest with you, okay? I'm not Tony."

A smile crept across Mario's lips.

"He's my best friend, and people are always getting us confused . . . but I'm not him."

"Hey, why'd you turn off, huh?" Mario continued to smile. "You're afraid I'm a cop, right?"

"No."

"Right?"

"I'm not Tony," I insisted.

Mario pulled out his wallet and opened it up to his driver's license. "See? Mario Soleriani."

I countered with my own identification and felt depressed as I saw the look of disappointment in his face. The friendliness was suddenly gone.

"Pring Davidson? You half-Oriental, too? Yeah, I can hear it now. You got a little accent there, and Tony didn't."

I nodded.

"So, where can I find him? I heard he hung out here." Mario nodded toward the bar, then looked around impatiently.

I hesitated.

He studied me with lucid, intelligent eyes. "How about you getting him on the phone with me, okay? It's very important."

I saw nothing wrong with that idea and eagerly pointed across the street. "I live just up there." I childishly figured that perhaps he might reward me with his body.

"Your place it is, then." The big man led the way across Christopher Street, then looked me over. "You look like a model, you know that?"

"I *was* one up until a couple of years ago," I said, wondering if he found me attractive. "Then I got too old for them."

"Too old?" He frowned. "You're what, twenty-two, three?"

I grinned. "Twenty-seven."

"That's too old?" He looked incredulous.

"It's a very competitive business. But I have a degree in journalism from Columbia, so I got a job with a trade magazine." I chuckled. "I make about a sixth of what I made as a model."

"What kind of magazine?"

"Trade. The ceramics industry."

"Oh." He seemed to become deep in thought.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, then I gestured toward the four-flat brownstone where I lived. As I led him up the three flights of stairs and unlocked the door, I began to fear him and realized that I was doing something stupid. *Jesus, Pring, what if he just beats Tony's address and telephone number out of you?* "Beer?"

"Yeah." He scanned my rather dull but neat studio apartment as I went to get two beers from the refrigerator. "Nice apartment for such a run-down neighborhood. How many times have you been robbed?"

I brought him his beer and gestured for him to sit on the hide-a-bed couch, which he did. "Three times." I nodded toward my stereo components against the far wall, which was decorated with cheap posters. "That's my third stereo."

He looked down at the white area rug in front of the couch and under a coffee table. "What kind of rug is this?"

"Fake llama. Just an extra shaggy shag rug." I took a sip of beer and studied him. "Feels wild on bare skin."

He grinned nervously and halfheartedly rubbed his crotch, which was his invitation for me to make the first move.

But I couldn't.

"How do you like it?" he said at length. "In the mouth or up the ass?"

The remark stunned me. "I beg your pardon?"

He frowned. "Isn't this part of the game? You call Tony for a price, right? The price is my dick, right?"

At any other time, I would have been on him in a second, but there was something about him that made me stop and take careful stock of what I was doing. I had to move him, and a blow job wouldn't be the means. Somehow, I had to get him stripped of his clothes and defenses and into a warm bed for the night.

"What's wrong?" he asked, puzzled.

"This is not going to work," I said, my eyes locked on his face. My attraction was awesome and gathering momentum. His unique essence reached me, unleashing an undulating anxiety. "Uh, I don't know how to say this . . . " I placed my hands to my face. "It has to be different with you. I . . . uhh . . . I got to have you in . . . " I swallowed with difficulty. " . . . in bed, or . . ."

A mixture of revulsion and impatience came to his face. "Naw, come on," he said, unzipping his jeans and struggling to get his flaccid penis out. "Take it, then we can call Tony and I can get back to Queens." He looked at his watch.

"The story of my life. They either have to get back to Jersey or Queens." I stared at his cock. It looked like one of those dicks you find in classy porn magazines—all white and clean and diffused, like a baby's portrait. I began to tremble. "I want to make love to you."

More revulsion. More impatience. "You mean the whole bit? Kissing and shit like that?"

I nodded.

He suddenly stood up and hastily stuffed his penis back inside his jeans. "Hey, you little shit. I don't know where you're coming from, but I'm not interested in games." Hostility crept over his face. "You led me to believe that you'd get me in touch with Tony in return for my cock, goddamnit. Now get on the fucking phone or tell me where he is." His eyes were ice cold; his mouth was taut, his body coiled. He gave himself a macho thump on the chest. "Come on, man, do I look gay to you?"

"Hardly," I said, getting angry. "You look like some super macho type who's scared to death he might *be* gay."

Mario sighed deeply and gestured pleadingly with his hand. "Okay . . . okay . . . . I really need to find out where this Tony character is. It's *business*, you know?" His lips tightened. "And there's just no room for bull shit." His face reddened. "Now either make the call or I'll get his address out of you one way or

another."

"He's my best friend, and I'm not giving his whereabouts to some fucking queer-hating Neanderthal," I spat.

As he came for me over the coffee table, I pulled out my switchblade and clicked it open. His grip on my shirt relaxed as I held the glistening blade against his throat. "Get out," I said softly.

As a boyish, embarrassed grin came across his face, he released me. He shook his head, then walked to the door and rested his hand on the knob. He turned and looked at me solemnly. "I have no intention of hurting you or Tony. I want to make a deal with him, that's all . . . . I'm sorry I went after you." His voice was just above a whisper. "That's not like Mario Soleriani. I guess it's just that I'm under a lot of pressure."

I lowered the knife and felt the tension begin to leave my body.

"In case you change your mind," he continued, "tell him I'll be at the 'Mirage,' say around six tomorrow night." He turned the knob, then hesitated again. "You know, most people, all they see is the cock. But you? You're different . . . . Maybe you're right. Maybe I am scared to death over being . . . you know . . . gay."

Astonished, I sat down. I was attracted to him more than ever.

"If you get me lined up with Tony, who knows? Maybe I'll go the whole route." With that, he knelt on one knee and lifted his trouser leg, adjusting an ankle holster and .38, half inside his boot. He looked up at me and smiled. "These things are a pain in the ass. Not too good with boots."

The blood must have drained from my face out of fear, because he was grinning as he slipped out the door.

I stood by the window in the dim light and watched him skip down the stairs and stop on the sidewalk. He looked up at me and smiled again, shaking his head in what appeared to be thorough amusement. He laughed and walked down the sidewalk.

I lay in bed, staring at the patterns of light on my ceiling, feeling moved and altered. I had traversed the wilderness of that nadir, that abject loneliness, which had held me for so long. Ascending now, I would suck Mario into my life.

FOUR

Friday, August 9th

I'd arranged to have lunch with Tony and Denise that afternoon. We met in a Japanese restaurant on East 50th and were ushered shoeless to a private booth with sliding doors. We ordered plum wine and sushi for starters.

"So what's all this shit about grizzlies?" asked Tony, giving me a Bette Davis eye flash.

Denise appeared to be excited, no doubt over the prospects of her predictions coming true.

"I met one last night. His name is Mario and he wants to meet you. He's in his late forties, drop-dead-rugged handsome, built like a pro wrestler and hung like a Clydesdale."

Tony frowned. "What's the catch?"

"He probably wants to break your neck," offered Denise, obviously disappointed that her prediction had not come true for me.

"I have no idea, but I get the feeling it has something to do with drugs. He looks very Mafia—in a sexy sort of way."

"Oh, my God," said Denise. "You promised, Tony."

"I'm clean, Denise. I swear to God," insisted Tony, glancing at me.

Of course, I knew that he was lying.

Tony seemed to search his mind. "Nicky?"

"No . . . Mario was his name," I reminded.

"No, Nicky The Horse. He's the one who had my legs broken when I tried to free-lance."

The door slid open and a petite, kimono-clad Japanese waitress knelt and served plum wine and sushi.

"So . . . Sola . . . Soleriani! That's it," said Tony. "Nick Soleriani."

"This guy's name is Mario Soleriani."

Denise shook her head sadly. "So help me God, Tony, I'll turn you in if you get into pushing dope again." She turned to me. "And *you* . . . stay away from the rough ones or you'll end up in hot water."

"Would you shut your hole, Denise?" shot Tony, obviously upset over the news.

"What do you think he wants?" I asked. "You know, he sort of got a little rough at first, but he had . . . well he had class, you know. He apologized for coming at me when I refused to tell him where you were."

"Class?" asked Denise, dumbfounded. "He *came at you*?"

"He carried a pistol, Denise. I pulled my knife and he backed off, but he could have blown me away. And he apologized."

Denise appeared bewildered as she looked first at me, then Tony.

"He said he'd meet you at The Mirage tonight at six," I said.

"Don't go, Tony," warned Denise, getting up. "I have to go tinkle. Talk to him, Pring." She opened the sliding door and disappeared.

"You lying shit," I teased.

"Shhh," admonished Tony, waiting until Denise was out of hearing range. "Hey, I'm not stepping on Nicky's toes, man. I practically work for him now, but he doesn't know it." He smiled. "You say the guy's hung? Did you have him?"

"No, but I wish I had."

"That good, huh?" Tony's expression suddenly soured. "Shit! I have to deliver a bunch of Qualuudes by six-thirty in the East Village. Then I have to work at the bar for four hours."

"Meet him afterwards," I suggested. "I'll meet him at the Mirage and tell him."

"You're determined to have him first, aren't you, slut?" Tony thought for a minute. "Have him meet me at The Brig on West Street, say after midnight."

"The Brig on West Street after midnight," I repeated.

"The manager at The Brig knows a lot of mob types," said Tony. "Maybe he can tell me if this Mario character is related to Nicky."

The sliding door opened and the waitress asked us for our orders. Just as we had given them, Denise returned and ordered tempura. During lunch, Tony announced that he had no intention of meeting "this Mario person," and the subject was abandoned for the sake of Denise.

But Mario never left *my* mind. In a way I was glad that I'd be alone with him again. But what would his reaction be to Tony's not showing up? I became apprehensive.

When I got back to my office in Penn Plaza I felt as if I'd entered hell. There was a message to call the editor-in-chief about six missing pages from my September issue. My manag-

ing editor was frantically looking for me and had been by my office twenty times, or so Big Bitch said.

Big Bitch, known as Wanda Warren by everyone else, was a six-foot-two, 250 pound amazon who despised homosexuals. Unfortunately, as associate editor of a sister magazine, she was my counterpart and occupied the office next door to mine. Any indication that I was in trouble with the boss, which was often, would delight her to near orgasm, I was sure.

As I dialed the editor-in-chief, she stood in my doorway glaring at me. "I heard you also had a caption wrong on a photo." Her voice was almost lower than mine and I was amazed that she wasn't a lesbian. "Are you calling the boss?"

"Would you mind stepping into the hallway? I have claustrophobia," I said acidly.

After calming the editor-in-chief by reminding him that I'd hand-carried the six pages down to him two days earlier, I glanced up and found Wanda still standing in the same spot.

"Did he say anything about the caption?" she asked. Her voice took on a mocking, nauseating timbre. It was worse than the sound of fingernails on a blackboard.

"Don't you have something to do, *Miss* Warren?" I asked indifferently, then turned and opened a file drawer.

"My issue was done two days ago," she said smugly.

"Then take the day off and go look for a husband."

She smirked and walked away, mumbling some phrase which had the word "fruit" in it.

As for the caption, I had purposely typed it that way and left it out on my desk to confirm the fact that Big Bitch snooped while I was away. The photo wasn't even used in the issue. Suddenly, the magazine editor rushed into my office. He was rather large himself and would probably resemble Wanda if it weren't for his lack of hair.

"Yes?" I said sweetly.

"What's this I hear about an obscenity in a caption? And in a photo of CEOs no less." He was livid.

"I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about, Dick. There *is* no photo of CEOs in this issue," I said calmly. "Who told you that?"

I envisioned Big Bitch pressed against the wall outside the door, listening anxiously. "Someone's giving you erroneous information, Dick." I could sense a slight embarrassment, but didn't expect an apology. It wasn't his style.

"What about those missing pages?" he asked, less agitated.

"The boss had them all along."

"The issue's all set then?"

"All set." It was my turn to be smug.

As he turned to leave, I said: "Oh, Dick, would you do me a favor? Could you tell Miss Warren to stay out of my office and to keep her obscene nose out of my magazine?"

"I'll talk to her," he said softly, turning to leave.

I shut my door to be alone with my thoughts, knowing that they would eventually turn to Mario. I vividly remembered my father taking me to a place called Simanggang in Sarawak, on the island of Borneo—now part of Malaysia. He was negotiating a deal with some local ethnic Chinese businessmen and took me along because it was my birthday. Actually, my mother had insisted.

One day we went on a side trip with a government official to the Boven Kapuas foothills to see orangutans, which weren't so rare in those days. It wasn't much cooler or dryer, but it seemed so lush and fresh. At one point I became temporarily separated from the others and could only stand there among the tall trees and marvel at the majesty of the scenery. While scanning the tree tops, I connected with another pair of eyes and locked onto them. A huge, white orangutan was staring down at me with a sad, lonely expression on his hooded face. I was old enough to know about albinos and rare all-white specimens of many mammals, but to see this creature was to enter a magical kingdom. I seemed to communicate telepathically with the magnificent ape and wished that I could have joined him up there at the tree tops. Even though I was only seven, the incident evolved into a powerful sexual experience and nestled into my memory as such. Of course, my father never believed my story, in spite of the fact that I hyperventilated when I excitedly tried to relate the experience. He insisted that there was no such thing as an albino orangutan, and the government official smiled at me condescendingly.

Leaning back in my chair, I let myself slide into another plane and found myself again in that rain forest, staring up into Mario's eyes.

He was lying nude upon a nest made of banana leaves and branches, just high enough for the sun to reach him in spots and streaks. Soft exotic sounds from monkeys and birds drifted over from other parts of the forest, then other tonal sounds came, and I recognized Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun."

The sound of driving, anxious chords coaxed me to rip away my clothing and climb the massive tree as he gazed down at me. And as I climbed higher and higher, he began to stroke himself and lick his lips. I shuddered and climbed urgently on until I could smell his desire and feel his powerful arms reach for me and pull me up over the edge of the nest. He rose and stood over me, becoming an awesome, eagle-like silhouette against the piercing rays of the sun. Debussy romance swirled over the tree tops, warming with rich resonance, driving me to frenzied kissing of his feet, slowly lifting me with ecstatic crescendos until the image of his steaming penis loomed in front of my eyes.

The telephone rang, and I abruptly lifted the receiver, letting it fall back into the cradle. I tried hard to submerge back into my reverie, but it rang again insistently, destroying my erotic fantasy. It was Tony.

"That cunt cut me off," he said angrily.

"You wouldn't believe what *you* cut off," I countered.

"What?"

"Never mind. What's up?"

"Mario Soleriani. Forty-eight, five-foot-nine, dark hair, light complexion, tan eyes, twenty-inch arms and a ten pound cock. *Honey, honey!*"

I was totally caught off guard. "That's him. I suppose now you'll say that he's a hit man, has killed hundreds, and that I'm lucky to be alive."

"He's Nick Soleriani's younger brother and get this: my source says he was kicked out of the marines very mysteriously. He was a fucking master sergeant. I'll bet he's gay, Pringaling. My source says he's seen him in the leather bars, but he never leaves with anyone. Sounds like he's got a problem."

"So what does he want with you?" I asked, anxious for my upcoming second chance.

"Beats me. He's always gone his own way according to my source. No rackets, no prostitution, no dope—no nothing. Nicky's a different story, though. He's part of the Tringili family,

but sort of small time. I think he fell from grace and got demoted."

"Well, we'll know what he's after in a few hours." I looked at my watch. It was 4:30.

"I'd better get my act together. I have to shop before I deliver those Qs. See ya at midnight."

"Yeah, be careful. Bye." I looked at my watch again. It was 4:31, and it occurred to me that my nerves were shot already.

I put on my jacket and opened the door, interrupting a female bull session outside my office. Big Bitch and the other girls glared at me.

"Good afternoon, ladies," I said, slightly bowing and walking past them.

I left the office and walked as leisurely as I could from Penn Plaza all the way up to Third Avenue and Fifty-fifth. It was 5:55 when I entered the Mirage, a popular watering hole for those who wanted to make out early. It had a long bar with no bar stools and several comfortable chairs and couches in the rear. As usual, it was three-deep at the bar with well-dressed men from thirty to sixty-five years old.

I spotted Mario instantly. He was standing alone near a huge fireplace in the rear. Even from fifty feet away I recognized his disappointment as he saw that I was alone. Struggling to the end of the bar, I got a martini and joined him.

"He couldn't make it here but he'll meet you around midnight in the Village," I said quickly and nervously.

The disappointment left his face and was replaced by the same good-natured look that had so devastated me the night before. The dimple in his right cheek drove me to distraction.

I responded with a smile. "How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Good, but I'll be better after I suck on this martini for a while."

He looked incredibly gorgeous in a tan suit with a brown-and-white tie. His hair was salt and pepper and cut short. His brilliant tan eyes enhanced the image, making him the most striking man in the bar.

Realizing that I was on the brink of drooling over him, I composed myself and took a sip from my drink.

"I can see why you were a model," he said, eyeing me from the bottom up. "Great suit."

I took a gulp from my drink. "So much for composure," I mumbled into the glass.

"What's that?" he asked, knowing, I'm sure, that I wouldn't repeat it. He knew how he was affecting me.

"He wants to meet you at The Brig on West Street after midnight. You have a change of clothes with you?"

He nodded. "In the car."

I braced myself for a negative response. "If you want, you can change at my place," I said as casually as possible.

He smiled. "You want to collect early?"

"Who says I want to collect?" I shot back. Flustered, I lifted my drink quickly and cracked the glass against a front tooth, which caused Mario to chuckle and look away. Proud and furious, I pretended that it had never happened and stared straight ahead, even though tears of pain were trickling down my face.

He peered around and grinned at the sight of my tears, almost choking on his drink as he suppressed a laugh.

The pain dissolved and the humor hit me, forcing me to start giggling. Then we were both making wheezing, muffled, chuckling sounds. He nodded toward the front of the bar and lead me through the mass of well-dressed patrons.

Out on the sidewalk, we laughed it out of our systems while walking down Third Avenue. Not far away we reached a garage, and he walked inside while I waited at the curb. Nothing was said about where we were going, but I assumed that Mario wanted to go to my apartment. I watched him as he paid his ticket and counted out the change. As the cashier gave a part of the ticket to an attendant, Mario walked to a pay phone and made a call. The acute seriousness of his expression made me shudder. A short time later, there was a squeal of tires as a beautiful white Corvette carne into view. It was Mario's car.

The traffic had been awful. Dripping with perspiration, we entered my apartment while almost dragging our coats and ties. I quickly turned on the air conditioner as Mario collapsed on the couch, gently placing his overnight bag beside it.

"Cold beer?" I asked.

"Man, that'd be great," he said, leaning back and closing his eyes as the cool air began to reach him.

As I walked past him to enter the kitchen, I glanced down, just as his eyes opened again. They locked onto mine, distracting me and causing me to stumble on the edge of the shag rug. Exasperated by my clumsiness, I shook my head and fetched beers from the kitchen.

"I thought Orientals were supposed to be stoic," he said, chuckling. "You're about as stoic as a traffic jam."

"Obviously you've never taken a subway in Tokyo," I said, handing him a beer and plopping down in an adjacent chair. " . . . or shopped in Hong Kong."

"I'm talking about your expressions," he interrupted. "What's your other half again . . . your father's side?"

"American."

"That's it."

"What do you mean, 'that's it'?" I said with mock indignation.

"We Americans aren't stoic." He took a big gulp from his beer. "Makes for a good combination, though."

I felt a huge knot tighten in my stomach as he followed up his casual compliment with a dimpled smile.

"Hungry?" I asked.

"No," he said, taking off his shoes and placing his feet upon the coffee table. "You?"

"Not really," I said, also taking off my shoes and doing likewise.

"You have anything to smoke besides tobacco?"

"I don't smoke cigarettes, but I think I have a little grass somewhere." Then I remembered that Tony had stashed away eight rolled joints in a drawer under the coffee table. "The drawer right under your feet."

He opened it and frowned. "They look old." He handed one to me, lit it, then lit his. A rich, sweet odor began to envelope us.

"We have four hours," I said, looking at my watch. "Might as well get stoned."

He took a drag and held it deeply inside his lungs. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to take a shower and maybe take a quick nap." He smiled as if he'd left out something between the shower and the nap.

It was the first time I'd ever seen a man over forty smoke grass, and I was amazed. "Maybe I should catch a few winks, too," I said, anticipating the effects of the high-grade Colombian grass. "I've been at it since . . . " I remembered that I'd not slept much the night before. " . . . pretty early this morning."

He rolled his head back and looked at me from the corner of his eyes. "I hope you don't take offense, but I'd like to see Tony alone."

I took a deep drag and hid my disappointment. "Big secret, huh? You realize, of course, he'll tell me all about it."

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't. As far as I'm concerned, though, it's between him and me. I'd rather not get you involved."

I dropped what was left of the joint into an ashtray and went to get Mario a towel and washcloth. "Tony's my best friend," I said from the bathroom. I placed the towel and washcloth on the commode cover and pulled a fresh bar of soap from the cabinet under the sink.

"I promise you I'm not going to harm him in any way," I heard him say.

When I returned, Mario had stripped to his jockey shorts and was rummaging through his overnight bag. "Any harm that comes to Tony is going to be due to the risks of the trade. No one forced him into pushing dope."

I sat in the chair again and scrutinized his brawny body. A thin layer of fat gave his muscle structure a soft, yet defined, beefy quality. His chest and leg hairs were dark and fine, like mine. I felt an overpowering urge to pull him backwards onto the rug and slowly make love to him. "He learned his lesson years ago. He doesn't mess around with the hard stuff any more and he doesn't free-lance. He just sells weed, hash, speed—stuff like that."

Mario stood up, holding a stack of leather bar clothing. "I can't blame him for not telling you everything." He walked past me, headed for the bathroom. "I wouldn't want to lose a friend like you either." He placed his clothing on a kitchen chair.

While he showered, I tried to figure out exactly what he had meant. Giving up, I pulled out the hide-a-bed and pulled down a light blanket and pillows from the hall closet. Passing by Mario's bag against the side of the couch, I peeked inside and saw his .38, which made me feel apprehensive again.

A short time later, Mario came out of the bathroom nude and lay on the bed, covering himself to the waist with the blanket. He stretched and yawned, then glanced at me. "There's room for two here."

I leaned back in the chair and shook my head. "Now's not the right time."

"No?" he said, obviously puzzled yet impressed, I hoped.

"No," I assured him, feeling terribly ambivalent.

"And you think that by abstaining, I'll be more inclined to see you again, right?" He didn't wait for an answer and rolled over onto his side. Shortly, he was sleeping and snoring softly.

I watched him as he slept.

A few seconds after 11:30, I realized that I'd dozed off in the chair and he'd slipped out. I rushed to the window and saw him get into his Corvette across the street. Without glancing up at me, he drove off.

Unable to stay put, I left the apartment and walked the six or so blocks to The Brig. Spotting Mario's car parked less than a block away, I sat atop one of twelve motorcycles parked in front of the bar.

A short time later, Mario burst out of the bar and strode angrily toward his car. As the Corvette sped in the opposite direction, I sighed and began to slowly walk toward my apartment. Then I heard a screech of tires and grinned as the sports car rushed toward me in reverse. The passenger door opened and I eagerly got in.

"Tony got busted," Mario said with a pained expression.

"Oh, God, no," I said. "The Qualuude delivery." I felt sick at first, but then I began to think that it could be a blessing in disguise. In New York, a drug bust wasn't exactly the end of the world. It was only pills, too. Maybe this would convince him to finally get out of the business, I reasoned.

"Poof!" he spat, gesturing with both hands. "It all just goes up in smoke."

I pulled a joint from my shirt pocket and lit it, forcing myself not to think of Tony. I was determined to get into Mario's life, and it was the time to pull out all the stops.

Mario drove through the Battery tunnel to Brooklyn and headed for the Verazzano Narrows Bridge.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked, taking a drag from the joint I extended and handing it back to me.

"El Paso," I said with already numbing lips. I so desperately wanted to impress him.

"El Paso?" he laughed.

"Yeah, and on the way, we could stop for peyote." In spite of my creeping intoxication, I was amazed at the words coming forth from my mouth. I had already decided to become what I thought he wanted me to be.

"How about some local mescaline?"

"No. Let's go to El Paso."

"Would you settle for Bayonne or Perth Amboy?"

"Fuck Bayonne. And fuck Perth Amboy, too."

Soon we were on the big bridge, and I stared at the blazing skyline of Manhattan. I felt alive and fearful of nothing. Somehow I knew that, for better or worse, my quest had ended with Mario Soleriani.

"Do you have a dollar?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, digging inside my pocket and pulling out four quarters.

Mario paid the toll attendant. "I think we're in Bayonne."

"You're more stoned than I am. This is Staten Island. Drive fast, because I can't stand Staten Island *or* New Jersey."

"I'll get on the Turnpike. You want to go to Philadelphia or upstate New York?"

"I don't like Philadelphia either," I slurred.

"North, then. You got another joint?"

I pulled out another one and placed it in his mouth, then traced his lips with my finger. "It's from Colombia."

"Colombia, my ass. Probably from some kid's planter box," he teased, lighting it, then choking.

"You'll think planter box when it hits you and you can't see the road any more."

Eventually we were on the Palisades Parkway headed north, and Mario pulled into a lookout point which was closed for the night. He stopped the car, then got out and moved the barricade. I slid over and drove the car forward as he replaced it. He jumped into the passenger side and pointed at a spot hidden from the highway.

I drove there, turned off the lights and killed the engine; we sat, entranced by the lights on the other side of the Hudson River.

"What were you doing, sitting on that motorcycle? You got the hots for me by any chance?"

"Screw you."

"Is that Thai for 'yes'?" he asked, getting out of the car.

I likewise got out and followed him to a rock wall, beyond which there was a precipitous drop. As we looked down

at the sparkling river, I placed my arm around him, and he moved closer to me.

After a few moments of gazing at the Manhattan skyline, he grabbed my hand and led me away from the car and toward some trees nearby. A waning full moon illuminated a picnic table, and we went to it. Stripping, we placed our clothes on top of the table and lay atop the clothes. I licked his goose-pimpled chest, causing him to quake. A cherished moment with my father surfaced in my mind and seemed to move aside and make room for a new one.

I pored over his moonlit body, hoping that it would be mine. I felt like a hungry wolf staring at the delicious mounds of freshly killed, succulent deer flesh. I wanted to howl and celebrate the imminent feast.

His breasts lured me to suck them, to nibble at them teasingly, causing him to squirm. I breathed in the special essence that rose from his silky chest hair. It wasn't the same variety of male smell I was used to. No, this odor didn't just get a cursory olfactory "glimpse." His was a unique scent—something that wafted into my head and reacted with my own chemistry. It got the immediate attention of all my senses, which seemed to implore me to linger and savor. I smelled and licked his abdomen then buried my face in his pubic hair, exhaling hot air until I could feel his cock drool on my face. The clean crotch scent was utterly mesmerizing, and all I could think of was the word, "mine." I mouthed the word as I hissed into his pubic forest, then whispered it softly. It felt so good to say it.

And then I felt his urgent need and cradled his shaft with my tongue, bracing it for a rapid ascent into my loving mouth. My gag mechanism was overridden by sheer desire; I took him fluidly until every inch was enveloped in moist warmth.

"Jesus Christ," he choked, bracing himself with his elbows, staring at me in awe.

I pulled up for a deep breath then descended again, fluttering my tongue around the tops of his testicles.

"God almighty," he moaned, falling back. He pressed his groin tightly against my face and traced the outline of my mouth with trembling fingers. It was as if he just couldn't believe it was happening, and I wondered if anyone with adequate skills had ever taken him. I thought not.

He gasped and pushed me away. "Close . . . too close . . . savor it."

I rose to a kneeling position and watched his penis throb as he strained with tightly closed eyes to delay his ejaculation.

He sighed and opened his eyes. "Are you sure you're ready for someone like me?"

"I want your fire . . . I want anything you care to dish out," I whispered emphatically.

"Then hang on," he said with a dry, hot voice," because I'm not gonna try to hold back again."

I took him again and felt his legs begin to harden. His precum began to spill out in greater abundance. Deftly, I fell into a rhythm, increasing it as more precum reached my tongue. His breathing became louder and was punctuated with moans and bits and pieces of garbled, whispered praise for what I was doing to him.

I felt his body ripple as blood cascaded through his swelling vessels, making his cock convulse. His strong legs clamped around my neck, bracing me for his arriving load, which spilled down a willing, slick throat. His nectar sizzled and conga-danced down to my stomach, where acids attacked it, converting it to an addictive elixir.

Honey, honey.

This man is mine, I thought, softly howling up at the moon.

FIVE

Saturday Morning, August 10th

I was awakened by a tapping on the windshield. Opening my eyes, I saw the unfocused image of an upside-down black face and realized that I was lying on my back on the seat of the car. Disoriented and terribly hung over, I bolted up to a sitting position and was assaulted by the fierce morning sun. I squinted and looked back at the black man. He was a smiling Parkway maintenance man, so I lowered the window.

"Just wanted to make sure you weren't dead," he said. "You'd better move on now. This place is supposed to be closed for some weekend maintenance."

I nodded and he walked toward his truck. *Mario. Where is Mario?* I got out of the car and scanned the area, then walked fearfully up to the wall at the cliff. I felt the numbness of panic crawling up my spine as I peered over the edge and looked down into the chasm.

I heard the maintenance man greet someone and turned to see Mario coming from the woods. Relieved, I wobbly sat on the wall and waited for him as he said a few words to the man and ambled on toward me.

"Did you think I jumped?" He grinned. "I left a shoe by the picnic bench. I've been looking for the fucker for thirty minutes."

I shook my head wearily and wondered what he could see in my eyes. He was still smiling, so I assumed that my adoring expression wasn't turning him off.

Driving back to Manhattan, he became pensive, but not really distant. He still responded to my small talk, but I could sense that something was terribly wrong. Reluctantly, I brought up the subject of Tony.

"Last night, the bar manager told me about Tony," he said, his expression somewhat darker. "I guess he was set up by the narcs. Sold some pills to two of them."

"I suppose I'll get him out on bail," I said, absently.

Mario looked at me sternly. "If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from him until this blows over. He was picked up by DEA feds. It wasn't your normal, everyday pot bust."

I was confused. "Run that by again."

He searched my expression. "You really don't know him that well, do you?"

"He's my best friend . . . "

"Oh, I see . . . best friend." Mario was mocking me.

Too soon, we were in the Village, and he pulled up in front of my apartment building. He sighed and glanced at me. "I would come up, but Tony's bust threw a monkey wrench into things. I'll call you as soon as I can."

As usual, my disappointment was as obvious as a lighthouse beacon. "You have my number?" I asked, sure he had not.

"Copied it down on a match cover while you weren't looking."

"Yeah," I said sadly. "Sure . . . "

He reached over and squeezed my knee. The touch of his hand sent shock waves throughout my system, and I felt a knot form in my stomach. "I don't fuck with people, Pring. If

I say I'll call, I'll call . . . . okay?"

I looked into his almost golden eyes and nodded, opening the door and waving slightly. Shutting the door, I felt something vital being ripped from me as he drove away.

Knowing that Denise had dated an investigative reporter who was an expert on the mob hierarchy, I called her. I told her about Tony's arrest and asked her to find out some basic information from her source and ex-heartthrob. She agreed to get the information I wanted, and we planned to meet at a chic restaurant on 83rd Street later that night.

I arrived and found her at the bar, dressed in a dazzling green Sarmi gown. She was talking to the bartender, who had an embarrassingly obvious erection. He gave me a hateful look as I greeted, kissed and ushered her away. I could imagine what she'd been telling him.

A waiter directed us to a table across the room from the bar and handed us menus. We both ordered a glass of the house wine.

"Okay," I said impatiently. "What do you have for me?"

She frowned. "Would you please stop it? My God, we haven't had dinner together in weeks."

"Sorry," I mumbled, rolling my eyes up and biting my lip.

She smiled fondly and seemed to review the memories of some of our dinners. "When was the last time we had a serious conversation about . . . life . . . the occult, your weird dreams . . . *you* . . . ?" She turned and looked at the bartender, who was looking back at her. " . . . me . . . my nymphomania." She turned back and smiled smugly.

"You know me better than anyone else in the world," I reminded her.

"I love you more than anyone else in the world." Her eyes became misty. "You know, of course, that I would make a big play for you if you weren't gay."

I rolled my eyes up again. "You've said that a couple of hundred times, Denise."

She laughed. "No, what you need is someone who will make you number one in their lives. You need someone you don't have to share."

I nodded in agreement.

"If you were straight, you'd probably marry a virgin." She sighed. "And I haven't been a virgin in over twenty years."

"If I were straight, I never would have left Thailand."

She studied me with a small, plaintive smile. "I remember so clearly when you came back to Columbia. You looked so utterly devastated."

The waiter brought the wine and said he'd come back to take our orders.

Denise got the cue and picked up her menu. "As close as we've become, you'd think that you'd tell me more about it. All I know is that your parents died in a plane crash."

I picked up my menu and scanned it. "I guess I haven't learned how to deal with it yet."

She considered my statement and looked at the menu in earnest. "Hmmm . . . the veal looks good." She put down the menu. "There's something I've always wanted to tell you, but I never got the nerve to do it. I guess I thought you'd think I was nuts."

I decided on what I wanted and gestured for the waiter, who approached and took our orders.

"So try me," I said after he had left.

"Remember when you used to come over and listen to my stereo collection?"

"Yeah," I said buttering a piece of bread to go with my wine. I remembered how she used to play records by composers I'd never heard of. All of the music was unique, fresh and exciting.

"Do you have any idea what composers like Holst, Dupré, Shostakovich, Bartók and Strauss had in common?"

I hadn't a clue and frowned.

"They all knew Saturn."

I shook my head, wondering if I'd heard her correctly. "Saturn?"

"Remember how much you enjoyed playing Holst's *The Planets* with the earphones on and how you used to shiver when the "Saturn" movement played . . . especially when the organ pedal kicked in? You said that the bass was the lowest you'd every heard and that it vibrated your soul."

"I said that?" The statement sounded vaguely familiar.

"You told me once that Dupré's *Symphony in G Minor* reminded you of walking on an alien surface, that the works of Shostakovich and Bartók portrayed sadness mixed with passion like no others. You played the final scene of Strauss' *Salome* again and again because you were 'trying to capture something.' You played *Elektra* and said that no one could project sweet madness like Strauss."

"So what does that have to do with Saturn?" I couldn't make the connection.

"Saturn is *Capricorn, Pan, Cronus, Satyr . . . Enki*, the great Sumerian god. It's all of those. Saturn is the dark brilliance of Dupré . . . Holst. It's the agony and strength of writers like Solzhenitsyn. The dream you told me about—the orangutan—confirms what I've been thinking all along. Do you know what the scientific name is for orangutan?"

I was uncomfortable in a way, because she'd never brought up such an esoteric subject. The edge in her voice was almost frightening. "I have no idea."

"*Simia satyrus*. Satyr . . . . Saturn."

I frowned and shook my head. "Never tell an armchair psychiatrist about your dreams."

"Are you listening to me?" She was irritated.

"Yes."

"I'm not an armchair psychiatrist, you jerk. I'm your friend." She looked deeply into my eyes. "I'm a good astrologer and psychic. I've done your chart and can tell you that you're changing. I can *see* it."

"So what do you see?" I tried to look sincere.

"You *know* Saturn, or perhaps I should say, 'You *will have known* Saturn in time.' Remember my telling you that transiting Saturn was on your ascendant right now? It's a good sign . . . for you. For others, it could be awful."

"And what is the advantage of . . . *knowing Saturn*?"

She smiled and sipped her wine. "If you don't fight him, he'll be your friend. Fight him, and he'll destroy you. Just go with the flow and allow him to lead you into uncharted territory."

"*Him*?" I chuckled, trying not to sound derisive. "And then what?"

"Then things will come your way. Sweetness, pain, sadness, passion, darkness . . . light. Your life will mean something."

The waiter brought our salads. I thought about all she'd said. I knew that something incredible was about to happen. We ate our salads in silence. I was certain that she wanted all of it to sink in . . . and it did.

Apparently convinced that she had reached me, she pulled a small notebook from her purse.

As dinner was served, she filled me in, reading from her notes through reading glasses. "Nick Soleriani was once a *capo* for the Tringili family in Brooklyn. Trouble is, he's an addictive gambler and kept getting into trouble with his debts. Consequently, he was sort of demoted and doesn't call too many shots any more." She looked over her glasses. "Why in hell are you interested in this guy? Isn't he the one Tony was talking about?"

"I'll explain later." I was becoming more impatient.

"It'll cost you," she said lecherously.

"What now?" I braced myself, knowing that Denise was always conning me into taking her to some of New York's most bizarre places. I lost track of the times she got into male drag and pushed me into escorting her to back rooms, leather bars, subway toilets, witch/warlock bars and God knows what.

"I want to see that bath tub at the bar on West Street."

"Denise, I'm eating!" I protested.

"I just heard about it and it sounds wild. They say that the piss gets a foot deep . . . "

"Denise . . . later, please. I'll take you . . . later," I said softly.

She shrugged. "Okay. Anyway, he was replaced as *capo* by this guy by the name of Cosotro, who has sort of gotten really close to the *don*. My source swears that there's bad blood between Nicky and Cosotro for some reason . . . and it's not just jealousy either. Sounds pretty volatile, huh?" She glanced back at the bartender, who was still staring at her hungrily.

"Finish filling me in and you can go for it, slut," I said anxiously.

"Subject Nick Soleriani has six or seven arrests from murder to rape—no convictions. When he was younger, he allegedly raped a girl—still no conviction—and ripped her to pieces. They call him 'Nicky The Horse' because of that beef tongue he carries between his legs.

Like big brother, like little brother, I mused. "No drugs?"

"My source says probably, but on his own. Same for Cosotro. That's probably the source of the bad blood. They have something on each other. Tringilis don't traffic in drugs." She watched as I tried to process all the information. "You want to know about Cosotro?"

I nodded. "Why not?"

"Five arrests—no convictions. Fraud, gambling, murder." She looked up. "But get this: there's a hushed rumor that he's bisexual! See? Even mobsters suck cock.

I was shocked to hear that about a mobster and tried to visualize Al Capone getting fucked by one of his enforcers.

She pushed the glasses up on her nose. "Just last year, he was questioned by Manhattan police. Some Filipino kid charged he was abducted at gunpoint and severely raped and beaten by Cosotro. He gave police the license plate number and Cosotro's description, but it was all for naught. The kid disappeared, so no charges were ever filed." She looked up. "Bill—my source—says that if Cosotro really is bisexual, the Tringili family certainly doesn't know about it. They don't take too kindly to drug dealing or a flamboyant lifestyle . . . and they especially don't like fags." She lowered her notes. "Now give."

I leaned back in my chair, awed by what she'd said. "Makes you wonder about our justice system."

"*What* justice system? There is no blindfolded woman with scales, my dear," she said. "If bribery doesn't work, intimidation will." She studied me. "Give."

"I met someone, like you said I would."

She slapped my hand and gave me a Ruth Gordon, "What'd I tell ya?"

"The same guy that wanted to find Tony. Mario Soleriani, Nick's brother."

Her smile faded.

"I get the feeling he's not like the others. After he found out that Tony was arrested, we went driving and had mad sex under the stars."

"In Manhattan?"

"Right in the middle of Columbus Circle," I said dryly.

The smile was back. "You gay kids are so brazen."

"Actually it was in Jersey on the Palisades—on a picnic table."

"Knowing you, I would have believed Columbus Circle. When do I meet him so I can do his chart?"

I felt a sudden pang of anxiety. I knew how protective Denise could be. "I don't know. He said he'd call back."

She gave me a motherly look. "He will. You're under some very strong progressed transits, too. Venus is in harmony with your sun and Mars, and Venus is the planet of love. This is your year for transformation . . . the year you'll get to know Saturn." Her expression slightly soured. "I just hope this guy's not giving you a line of bull shit, because your chart says you might attract some unsavory elements right about now, too."

"When is your year?" I asked, wondering why she never spoke of her own chart.

She sighed. "Who knows? I haven't had too much luck interpreting my own transits. Not enough objectivity, I suppose."

I felt so protective of and sorry for her. "I wish so much for you, Denise," I said sincerely. "You help me and so many others, but you can't seem to help yourself. I wish there was something I could do for you."

"Take me to the piss show," she blurted.

Something caught my attention and I nodded toward the bar. "I don't think so." The bartender had been relieved by another and was sitting at the bar staring at her.

Denise followed my gaze.

"I know you, my sweet," I said. "You won't turn that down, will you?"

She smiled and inspected the off-duty bartender. "So . . . how do you feel about this guy?"

"Mario?"

"Nick's brother."

"Yeah, Mario." I couldn't keep from smiling. The sound of his name made me shudder. I felt a constant longing for him. "I've never met a man like him. It's as if I've been marking time waiting for him. It's like . . . like . . . all the others were warm-up events and he's the main attraction."

She turned and gave the bartender a hot look. "Okay, let's forget the piss show. Guys this hot don't come along that often." She stood and the green fabric of her dress glided down her torso. "I'll call you."

I grinned as she approached the man, who squirmed as if he still had the erection.

Hailing the waiter, I gave him my credit card. By the time the bill was brought for my signature, Denise had already left with the bartender.

Taking a cab home, I felt the sweet pain of longing for someone other than my father.

SIX

Sunday Morning, August 11th

My door buzzer awakened me, interrupting the oddest dream. I'd entered the white room again, only this time it was filled with faceless people. Yet somehow I knew that a man standing before me was my father. Merging with him, I experienced ecstasy and peace. Although no words were spoken, assurances were made that I would be protected.

Protected from what?

I staggered out of bed, tears rolling down my cheeks. I didn't want the dream to end. I'd experienced an awesome sexual/spiritual feeling I couldn't fathom.

Gathering my wits, I walked to the open window and looked down at a man carrying what looked to be a large briefcase. Presented with the top of a thinning, dark-haired head, I had no clue as to who it was. I looked closer at the thing he was carrying and realized it was a suitcase. "Yeah?"

Mario looked up and smiled, and I felt my heart making bass drum sounds. Still disoriented, I rushed to the door and buzzed him up. As I heard his footsteps on the stairway, I was aware of a horrible taste in my mouth, prompting me to rush to the bathroom. I was furiously brushing my teeth when I heard his suitcase drop near the door.

"Where are you?" he asked, walking toward the bathroom.

"Uhhnn."

"What?"

"Mm buffng mm teeff."

"Oh."

After gargling with mouthwash, I combed my unruly hair and slipped into a robe. I found him sitting in the chair by the bed. He looked frightened.

"What's wrong?" I asked, finding it inconceivable that he could fear anything.

"Sit down," he said softly. "I have a couple of things to tell you."

I obeyed and sat across from him on the bed.

He grimaced, obviously wondering where to start. "I'm in a little trouble."

I contemplated his expression as a menacing chill permeated the room. It was evident that this man would come at a dear price . . . if he came at all.

"It's time to fill you in . . . tell the truth," he continued. "I assume you're no fool, so how much do you know already? You must have talked to Tony before he was nabbed."

I decided to level with him. "I know you're Nick Soleriani's brother, that you were a marine. I know that your brother is a gangster."

Mario looked impressed.

"I don't know exactly what you wanted with Tony, but I assume it had something to do with drugs." I looked up at him misty-eyed. "Somehow, I sense a reluctance on your part about the whole deal. And . . . and . . . I'm glad you're here."

He nodded and patted my knee, then leaned back in the chair. "Nick is my older brother. Since our mom and dad died back in the forties, he sort of raised me. I really care a lot about him, Pring, in spite of his . . . his occupation, let's say. He tried to get me into the family back in the forties, but I knew that was a dead-end street. So I joined the marines. I was going to make a career out of it." He swallowed and seemed to be reluctant about going on. "I saw some action in the Pacific during the big war and a *lot* of action in Korea. Two purple hearts. Good marine and all that shit." He smiled bitterly. "Then I made that one mistake that turned it all around. One night just before the end of the war, old master sergeant here got drunk and ended up being caught in a storeroom with his dick in some private's mouth. Of course, I got brig time, but they finally let me out with an undesirable discharge. Nick got his hands on the discharge and checked out the code. Of course, that really cooled him off on me, as you could imagine. If I'd killed my commanding officer, he'd have been there by my side, but getting involved with a cocksucker? I might as well be a child molester in his eyes."

He seemed to become engrossed in bitter memories.

"You want a cup of coffee or something?" I asked.

He nodded, so I went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

"I moved to a cheap apartment on the far west side of Manhattan and got a job as a bouncer in this night club. I guess I had . . . an urge, I suppose you'd call it. My mind kept going back to that cold night in the supply tent and how that guy had gone nuts over my cock. I could never shake the image, even though there was so much negative baggage that went with it: getting kicked out and all. And even though I had a couple of really bad experiences with possessive chicks and all . . . and began to hate women in general, I still had this guilt trip when I let some guy have me. It got too much and I guess I turned off to the whole sex thing. I sort of withdrew from the human race, is more like it."

Spellbound, I was devouring every word he said. I started the coffee and returned, sitting on the bed.

"Then, a couple of years ago, Nick sent for me. By that time, I was working at the docks. Beats the hell out of me how he found me. Makes you wonder about the so-called 'Mafia network.' Anyway, he said that he'd done a lot of soul-searching and was ready to accept me the way I was. Now, don't get me wrong, I love the guy and I'm grateful for him raising me, but I know my big brother." He chuckled. "I knew that there was something up his sleeve. And sure enough, he goes into this spiel about the opportunity in blackmail and how I could set up important cocksuckers for extortion."

I guess he expected a look of disapproval from me, but it wasn't what he found when he searched my eyes. Whatever it was, it made him look away quickly and almost made him lose his train of thought.

"He couldn't grasp the concept that a guy could be openly homosexual and impervious to blackmail, so that little plan didn't get too far." He glanced nervously at me again and hastily said, "Of course, I wouldn't have gone through with that, but you don't say no to Nick very often. You have to sort of ease things by him, you know?"

I nodded, then shuddered as I tried to conjure up the idea of having a man like Nick dominate you. Then, for the first time, I remembered what Denise had said about the size of the man's cock. "Does Nick swing both ways?" I blurted.

Mario seemed to weigh his answer. "It's not the same kind of thing as with me. I think Nick would fuck a knothole if nothing else was available. Years ago he bragged about letting some drag queen suck him off for fifty bucks, so with him it's a monetary thing. For the right price, he'd do just about anything."

"I heard they call him Nicky The Horse."

Mario smiled and shook his head. "You have some good sources, man." He seemed to linger on that thought, as if he was about to clam up.

"I have a friend who knows some investigative reporter with the *Globe*," I said quickly, hoping that I had not broken the

spell.

It was apparently the right thing to say, because he continued. "Last year, he came up with the most insane plan I've ever heard. He said that he found the chink in the armor of the guy he fears and hates more than anyone in the world. He said that if I helped him get through to the guy, he'd set me up with a business in California."

"Get through?" I questioned.

"Kill him." Mario studied me. "Nick is into this Tringili *capo* by the name of Cosotro for a fortune in gambling debts, but the big bosses don't know it. I'm talking big, big bucks. It's just between him and Nick, and Nick seems to think that Cosotro would rather rub him out than let it out of the bag that Nick was into him for that much money. It goes against the rules big time, if you get my drift. They're both into drug trafficking, too, and the family doesn't allow it."

I was enthralled in a chilling sort of way.

"But like I said, Nick got the goods on Cosotro. He got so desperate that he started following the fucker last winter and found out that Mister 'C' lives one hell of a double life. A couple of nights a week, he would head for a penthouse apartment over on East Thirty-first Street. He had these two young punks set up as houseboy/body guards and they would go off in search of meat for the monster. One of the punks turned out to be the son of a Tringili enforcer. Unbelievable! Couldn't get into the family business, I guess, so the kid takes the next best thing. Nick even *knows* the kid, for crissakes. Anyway, he found out that Cosie likes young Orientals, male or female, you see, and even got in hot water with the police a couple of times for being too rough. Then, when the weather started getting warmer, Cosotro began taking a train out to Long Island just about every weekend when there was no family business. The Tringilis thought he had some chick stashed somewhere. He apparently bought this beach cottage and had his punks watching over it when he wasn't there. They were probably handling his drug interests. Anyway, they'd pick him up at the train station in East Hampton in this big assed limousine and chauffeur him around. The three of them were going to this popular gay bar—big bar, packed to the gills on weekends and lots of young Orientals. They'd go just about every Sunday night—sometimes on Saturday, too—and Cosotro would sometimes get lucky. And if he didn't, there were always the punks. I mean, this guy has the whole Tringili clan buffaloed. None of them have any idea about his double life."

He checked out my expression, so I pretended to be shocked. In a way, I was, because I really hadn't believed Denise's source. I found it inconceivable that a Mafia *capo* could be bisexual.

"He really digs Orientals," he continued. "Good looking, *male* Oriental ass, preferably. So you can imagine all the wheels turning in Nick's devious brain. Well, the plan was to recruit somebody for the job of killing Cosotro. First choice, some Oriental Adonis. Second choice, some ambitious, corruptible punk who was close to Cosotro. And that's where Nick almost made a critical mistake. He tried to get friendly with the punk bodyguard he knew . . . to sort of feel him out about double crossing Cosotro."

I was confused and astounded that he was telling me so much. "But couldn't that give him away to Cosotro?"

"I thought it would, but the punk is ambitious . . . and Nick is pretty cautious. Anyway, it never got to that stage and Nick backed off. Why? Because he finally found the number one man for the job: *Tony*."

I wondered if I'd heard him correctly. "Tony?"

He nodded and seemed to watch my reaction very carefully.

I vigorously shook my head. "That's crazy, Mario. Tony wouldn't kill anybody."

"In return for a fortune in heroin and a one-way ticket to Bangkok? Don't be too sure."

I thought of how Tony had got involved the first time with Nick and had almost been killed—only to get back into it again. Then I remembered his confiding in me on occasion about how nice it would be to live luxuriously in Bangkok. I wondered if Mario knew Tony better than I.

"Pulling off the kill would have been the sticky part, though," Mario went on. "Nick got some timed-release *curare* from this Nazi from Sao Paolo. The granules are so small that a guy could drink them, and it would seem like fine particles of sand. Twelve hours later and he'd be dead of an apparent heart attack. The plan was to have Tony hang out in the bar. Nick figured that Cosotro would take Tony home eventually and that Tony could slip the *curare* in his drink." He shook his head and rolled up his eyes. "After I told him Tony was in jail, he flew into a rage, so I thought I'd let him cool off for a few days."

I looked at the suitcase by the door and suddenly all fear and doubt left me. "You mean you're going to stay with me for a while?"

He smiled in response to my sudden childish joy. "If you'll have me."

I sprang forward, straddling him in the chair, beaming at him. Feeling intense lust, I unbuttoned his shirt and kissed his hairy chest until my lips found an unsuspecting nipple. He shuddered, then gently pushed me away.

We undressed while locked in each other's gaze, then he slowly climbed into bed, lying on his back. I hovered over him, relishing the sight of his magnificent body. Lightly biting his left nipple, I felt him quiver under me; I watched as his lips slightly parted. Lured there, I kissed his cheek and felt his face turn away. Too much, I knew, so I backed away, letting my tongue glide down his neck, through his chest hair, around and around his navel. His thick stinger prodded my underjaw, leaving a trail of drool.

Knock, knock, I thought. *Can I come in?*

I focused on his thick, uncircumcised cock and saw that it had become turgid with deep red blood. As it pulsated, my tongue dipped into a small pool of precum in the slit and stretched the honey-like strand until it broke. I tasted his nectar and found it even more intoxicating than before.

I lapped up a streamlet of precum as it rolled down his shaft, then I buried his cock into the depths of my throat. Again his body shook. His tongue softened his dry lips, and somehow I knew that it would soon freely enter the moist warmth of my mouth and long to writhe with my tongue in fireworks foreplay.

I vowed patience, for I had found the man I so longed to have. And as I heard an animal-like groan emanate from his throat, I knew that I had moved him. He would learn the joys of reciprocal man-to-man love. I focused on his cock and heard the groan modulate to an atonal fanfare, rising, heralding the arrival of his sweet lava.

Later, as we lay in the darkness, he allowed me to nestle against his back with my arm resting across his waist. I slept peacefully and happily for the first time since childhood.

SEVEN

Monday Morning, August 12th

I was awakened by a wet, hard prodding against my buttocks. I turned over and found Mario smiling at me.

"You think you can find a nice warm home for this?" He pulled back the sheet, exposing a throbbing, drooling erection.

I was an hour and a half late for work, and Big Bitch greeted me with, "Good afternoon," which I acknowledged without returning her acidity. She eyed me suspiciously and went back into her office, mumbling.

I sat behind the desk and leaned back with my hands behind my head. I must have been smiling like Alfred E. Neumann.

Wanda passed by my office, glancing at me contemptuously. I heard her stop suddenly, then back up. She peered inside my office. "Are you ill?"

"Why, no, my dear. I feel fine," I cooed.

She smiled mockingly. "Looks like you had quite a weekend."

"I did," I said, sighing. "I do believe I'm in love."

"With *what*?" She crossed her arms, pleased with her barbed wit.

Prior to that remark, I had toyed with thoughts of our finally becoming friends. But I quickly negated any possibility of friendship with: "I heard this fabulous joke this weekend. This large lady with a big red hat is sitting on a barstool, sipping a martini, see. Then, along comes this shabby panhandler and sits on the next barstool. He gives her the old eye and whispers in her ear, 'I sure could use a little pussy,' to which she responded, 'Me, too, because mine's as big as this hat.'"

As I giggled at my own joke, her mouth fell open and her arms went slack.

"My boy friend told me that this morning in bed," I added.

Turning crimson, she fled.

I telephoned Denise and found out the name of Tony's public defender. I looked up his number and tried to call but only succeeded in reaching an answering service. I decided that Tony was probably better off in jail, so I hung up.

A short time later I called the apartment, but Mario didn't answer. Jealousy made a brief appearance, and I envisioned him getting blown in the Christopher Street subway toilet. Eventually I convinced myself that he probably went out shopping or took a walk. I reminded myself that he'd not made any commitment to me and that I had no right to be possessive or to even know where he was. I really didn't even know him. And, moreover, he'd promised to stay for only a few days.

Around lunch time I tried calling him again without any luck. Mildly anxious, I went for my ritual, daily walk.

It was hot out on the sidewalk; I strolled aimlessly down Seventh Avenue, looking into the same windows I'd gazed through for years. As I came to an intersection, a dark blue sedan with two men inside made a right turn in front of me and, out of habit, I glanced at the driver's crotch. Finding a definable bulge, I looked closer and saw that the driver was a stocky, middle-aged man with grey hair. Then I noticed the personalized license number: "NS 1."

I walked down to 30th Street, then over to Eighth Avenue, then back to 34th. Bored, I decided to head back to the office early and cool down. Then NS 1 passed by me again and pulled to the curb across the street from me. Wanting to get a better look at the bulge, I crossed the street and walked toward the car as near the curb as possible. Just as I came to within a few feet, the dark sedan abruptly pulled away, only to get stuck at the next light. As I reached the intersection and began to cross in front of the car, the driver reached for a pair of sunglasses and put them on. The passenger pulled up a newspaper, hiding his face. As I reached the middle of the intersection, a dark, oppressive anxiety gripped me, causing me to shiver. Reaching the curb, I turned and tried to get a better look at the passenger but was foiled by the sun's reflection against the window.

I got the impression that my little lunch time cruising ritual had resulted in a bit of cat-and-mouse. I wondered if they had been cops, just having some fun with me. But then, cops don't sport big-shot license plates.

A short time after 2:00 pm, Mario called and said that he'd been out shopping and had a surprise for me when I got home from work. Elated, I left work early.

The cooking fragrances were evident the instant I walked into the building. I could smell Thai food—well cooked Thai food. I opened the door and my new love met me wearing only green ultra-briefs and holding out a martini. I kissed him lightly on the cheek and took a gulp from the drink.

"Get comfortable. I've cooked you a little native meal," he said, going back into the small kitchen.

"You're kidding," I said facetiously. "I could smell it when I got off the train." I walked to a closet and began undressing.

"You got a letter from some bank in Switzerland," said Mario. "It's there on the coffee table."

I looked at it and quickly shoved it into the drawer. I wondered if it had aroused Mario's suspicion.

He joined me shortly with his own martini. "Everything's in the oven, so we can eat whenever you want. Maybe we shouldn't eat until we have a couple of these. That way you can't tell if it's authentic or not."

"It certainly smells authentic," I said, sniffing the air. "You must have found my Thai cookbook." Stripped to my underwear, I led him to the couch.

"That I did. How'd it go today?" He sat on the couch and sighed like he'd been going at breakneck speed all day.

I wiped perspiration from his brow as I sat next to him. "Pretty rotten until you called and started talking about surprises." I glanced down at the outline of his cock and balls and felt a desperate need to have him sit on my face.

"I only mentioned one surprise," he corrected.

I leaned over and placed my lips over the bulge in his underwear. He groaned and arched his back as I slowly exhaled a hot column of breath, sending it swirling through his pubic hair and down toward his scrotum. "So you did," I spoke into his crotch.

"There *is* another one, however," he said, sipping his drink and glancing down at my reaction.

As my tongue rested upon his right testicle, I eyed him suspiciously, then looked around the room for the surprise, as if expecting to see an expensive leather jacket draped over a chair. "Where is it?"

He chuckled. "In my head. I'll tell you after dinner."

Actually, the food wasn't far from being authentic. The *kai phat khing*, a stir-fried chicken dish, would have been, had he not used crystallized ginger instead of fresh shredded. The *yam tang kwa*, or cucumber salad, was marginal, but the *khanom*

talai desert was rich, creamy and very coconutty. I gave it a 9.5 rating overall, mainly because the cook was so gorgeous.

After stacking the dishes in the dishwasher, I joined him on the couch with two cups of coffee. He'd pulled a small shaving kit from his suitcase and was inspecting the contents.

"What's that?" I asked, placing a cup in front of him.

"A small portion of Tony's payment." He pulled out a couple of small, brown bottles, a vial of pills, and a small glassine envelope. "A little morphine, a bunch of speed and some very pure cocaine."

"That's a hundred thousand dollars worth of junk?" I asked, knowing it wasn't.

"The rest is with Nick. This is only a sample of the goods." He opened the glassine envelope and pulled out a small mirror, then rolled a dollar bill into the shape of a thin cigarette. "Want a snort?"

"That's really cocaine?" I felt like a kid about to smoke his first cigarette. Actually, I'd never considered doing anything stronger than marijuana, but I felt that it wouldn't hurt to try it once. Especially if it impressed Mario.

"It ain't baby powder," he assured, tapping out a small quantity onto the mirror. "Like this." He sniffed a tiny quantity up into his nose via the dollar bill, then handed me the mirror and the bill.

As I watched his face flush, I hesitantly took a small sniff.

"Candy ass!" he charged. "Take a big snort!"

Wanting to please him, I did so and almost sneezed. Then I felt a creeping iciness behind my eyes and a rush akin to sniffing amyl nitrite, the aromatic resuscitator a lot of gay men had begun to abuse and call "poppers." Tony had told me that both cocaine and "poppers" were aphrodisiacs, but I never believed him until the cocaine began to work. I hastily pulled down Mario's shorts .

Unlike Tony, whose sphincters quivered at the sight of any penis, I was not particularly interested in being on the receiving end of anal sex. I never really enjoyed being on the giving end either. The mere hint of feces would make me nauseous, and the pungent odor of smegma or an unclean anus would turn me completely off. So it came as a shock to me when Mario hinted that he wanted to fuck me by massaging my opening with his index finger. It was even a greater shock when I eagerly fetched baby oil and a towel from the bathroom.

"I've never been fucked before," I said, returning quickly. My lips were numb, my face flushed.

"And I've never fucked a guy before," he said breathlessly. "Two virgins."

As I stood next to the bed, holding the bottle of oil, he pulled my underwear all the way to the floor. "Lie down on your side in front of me," he instructed softly. "We have all night, so we'll do it nice and easy. I won't hurt you."

Dreamily, I handed him the bottle and did as I was told, moving closer to him as his rough hand spread the cold oil inside the crevice of my ass. Strangely, I wasn't afraid. I trusted him implicitly and expected to enjoy it.

While massaging and probing, he placed his free arm around my neck and playfully chewed on my shoulder. First one finger, then two, he took his time, heating and lubricating, chewing and moaning in my ear. And then it was three fingers, which produced a fleeting sting.

He pulled his fingers out and began massaging and lubricating his bloated penis, which he pressed against my opening. "Just relax," he soothed. "Just . . . relax."

His cockhead pushed harder until it slipped just beyond the first sphincter. I flinched as it stung, but he didn't push further. He stayed perfectly still and whispered soothing words of encouragement.

And when the pain subsided, I pressed against him for more, drawing a throaty chuckle. "Don't be in a hurry, Pring. Just let it happen naturally. . . . Let the first time set a . . . a precedence . . . for both of us."

As we lay together, I felt as if we were in a cocoon awaiting some sort of transformation. Mario seemed entranced, patient, in a dream state. Again I pushed against him, but we seemed flush against one another. I reached to feel and was elated to find him deep within me.

He slowly began to fuck me, bringing me sensations I'd never before experienced. His plump member massaged my prostate, bringing it alive with a tingling need for more heat, more pressure. His slow, gentle action was hypnotic.

And then he escalated his movement, and I acknowledged my approval by sucking on his thick thumb. His heavy testicles, wet with perspiration and oil, slapped against my ass as he lunged harder, struggling to go deeper. He began to whimper and chuckle at the same time, as if he were in some state of frenetic rapture.

Then came an explosive snort, which echoed in my head. It was a howl, growl and grunt, all rolled into one. Visions of an ejaculating, massive beast came to me. Against the setting sun on the Masai Steppes, I could see the horn of a white rhino spearing upward as his semen rushed into his mate underneath. I could see a banana leaf nest shaking, high above the Borneo canopy . . . could hear the low grunt of a white orangutan.

We made love again and again until Mario could no longer muster an erection, but I begged him to try once more. Sensing my escalating frenzy and filled with three times the cocaine I had sniffed, Mario surprisingly took my cock inside his mouth for the first time. I was stupefied and felt the numbing thunder of a giant gong, like that in the British Rank films or the one on King Kong's island. I warned him, but he wouldn't stop sucking. He wanted my load.

And then King Kong was looming over me, satisfied that he'd sent me to a distant star and back.

Slowly drifting back from where I'd been, I could hear Mario speaking from far away. He was telling me about the second surprise: that, providing I could take off for four or five days, we would drive to Provincetown on Cape Cod and be totally wild and carefree.

EIGHT

Tuesday, August 13th

After making arrangements with the managing editor to take four days vacation, I overheard Big Bitch telling another girl that all the bosses would be tied up in a meeting for the entire afternoon. Never passing up such an opportunity, all the girls went out for a long, late lunch. Alone in the office, I called the apartment, but there was no answer. Casting the renewed anxiety aside, I called a travel agent I knew in Manhattan and booked reservations at a guest house in Provincetown.

I decided to take advantage of the situation myself by shopping for dinner and getting it out of the way. On a whim, I had invited Denise to dinner earlier in the day but hadn't had the chance to tell Mario.

Carrying groceries up to the apartment, I heard my phone ring and wondered who it could be. After all, I was supposed to be at work. The phone stopped ringing as I entered the apartment. The stereo was on softly, but Mario wasn't there. I began putting things away and wondered what I could prepare in advance. Planning to serve lobster salad, I began heating water for the lobster tails while cleaning and storing assorted, fresh garnish greens and vegetables for steaming.

The phone rang again, and I answered it on the third ring. No one responded to my greeting, but I could hear a wheezing sound before the caller disconnected. I felt a chill creep up my back, and sat down on the couch, staring at the phone. Then I noticed a Long Island Railroad commuter schedule on the coffee table and a sheet of scratch paper, which had "Purple Door, Bridgehampton" written on it. I assumed it was Mario's writing. On a hunch, I opened the coffee table drawer and pulled out the letter from Zürich. It had been opened.

After preparing the lobster salad and putting it in the refrigerator, I left the apartment to go back to work. I found Mario's car parked on the street in the same spot as before and wondered where he was. Stepping into a newsstand on Christopher Street, I bought a paper to read back in the office, then noticed a familiar car turning up my street. Instinctively, my vision was drawn to the rear license plate. I could make out three symbols of a personalized plate, but it was too far to decipher.

I quickly walked to the intersection and peered around the corner up the street. The car was moving slowly by my apartment building, then disappeared around a corner.

From the office, I called the apartment again and got a busy signal. I dialed again and again until the line was open and Mario answered.

"He's there less than a week and already he's calling another trick," I said as casually as possible.

He laughed. "Hardly. You're more than I can handle. Just a wrong number."

I didn't bother telling him that the phone had been busy for over five minutes. I assumed that it was the same person who had refused to talk to me. "Don't eat the lobster salad in the fridge. It's for dinner tonight. I invited Denise over."

"Denise?" He sounded irritated in a subdued sort of way.

"She's like my sister. I think I mentioned her yesterday. I sometimes call her Denise Dildo, remember?"

"Okay. Yeah, I remember. Uhh, you want me to get anything?"

His tone of voice seemed to indicate he wasn't pleased with the idea. I found it odd, especially since he knew nothing of Denise or the fact that Denise was my source of information about Nick. I was beginning to find a lot of things rather odd and felt a growing apprehension vying with the elation I felt over going off with him for a week. "No, that's all right," I said at length. "I wouldn't want to send you out shopping again. What'd you get anyway?"

"I was looking for tank tops and a pair of leather sandals, but I couldn't find what I wanted."

"Oh, too bad," I said, becoming even more suspicious. "Well, the only thing we need for tonight is ice, and I'll pick that up on the way home. I'll see you soon."

I wondered if my ambivalence would stay with me once I was near him again.

Eventually Big Bitch and the girls came back, and it was obvious that they had consumed quite a bit of alcohol. An hour later, the high-level meeting was over and the office was again bustling with the sounds of typewriters and telephones. Thoughts of Long Island Railroad schedules, bars on Long Island, personalized license plates, and opened mail from a Swiss bank soon were replaced by thoughts of Provincetown. My mood began to improve.

When I got back to the apartment, Mario's attitude about Denise had also improved, and we made love twice before she arrived.

Denise got there just after seven, dressed in jeans and a *"Screw"* T-shirt. Besides her hand bag, she carried a briefcase loaded with astrological reference books. I made the introductions and went to make drinks. It was immediately evident that Denise was highly attracted to Mario. On the other hand, Mario seemed ill-at-ease around her, and I got the impression that he was forcing pleasantness.

"Today was a bitch," said Denise. "I barely made the deadline on my column. What do you do for a living, Mario?" She reached inside the briefcase for one of the books.

He seemed caught off guard. "Uhh . . . I sell insurance."

Denise nodded pensively, and I was happy that she didn't let on about her knowledge of Mario's brother and the mob in general.

"What's that?" Mario asked about the book.

"An ephemeris. It tells the positions of the moon, sun and planets on a given day." She put on her glasses and pulled out a ruled pad and pen.

"Oh, astrology," Mario said, glancing at me suspiciously.

I shrugged innocently.

"Right," said Denise, thumbing through the book. "That's the subject of my column. I'm also a psychic. What's your birth date?"

Mario glanced at me and grinned, obviously not the least bit a believer. "What's it gonna cost me?" He winked at me.

"Don't tempt me," Denise purred.

I bristled and glared at Denise, who appeared to regret her remark.

"Something tells me this was all planned," said Mario, shaking his head.

"Hey, it's a free reading," Denise complained, shrugging. "I usually charge for this."

"You believe in this stuff?" Mario intended the question for both of us.

"I didn't up until last Thursday," I said, smiling at Denise.

"I take it very seriously," Denise offered, pen and paper in hand.

"Okay," Mario said after a pause. "May ninth, nineteen twenty."

"What time and where?" she asked, thumbing through her ten year ephemeris for the twenties.

"The Bronx . . . . Let's see, I remember someone saying that Mom went into labor late afternoon. Then I arrived before sunset."

"Scorpio rising?" Denise could hardly contain herself. "God, not another one."

"What does that mean?" Mario asked, glancing at me.

I shrugged, thoroughly enjoying the exchange.

Denise tuned out of the conversation and worked swiftly on Mario's chart, glancing up from time to time with a moan or a whistle . . . and something else. *A look of dread?*

"I hope you don't mind," I said to Mario. "It seemed like it would be harmless fun."

Mario offered a relaxed, sincere smile, and I felt at ease.

"I don't mind. It's interesting, but I find it hard to believe." And in a lower tone of voice, he said, "Everything all set for tomorrow?"

I felt a quick rush of excitement about the trip. "Yep. No problem. I got us into a really nice guest house out on the west side.

He winked and looked down into an empty glass. I took the cue and made another round of drinks.

"I can't *believe* this," Denise blurted.

I noticed that she had my chart out, comparing it with Mario's.

"I've never seen so many conjunctions between two people."

"Is that good or bad?" asked Mario, seemingly taking it all lightly.

"*Honey, honey*," said Denise, using a phrase stolen from me by Tony.

"I think she means 'good'," I offered.

"Pring's Mars and sun are conjunct your ascendant, and Pring's ascendant is conjunct your Venus and Mercury. Also, your Neptune and Pluto are conjunct Pring's moon."

Mario laughed, and I had to join in at the risk of pissing Denise off.

"Pricks," she grumbled, pretending to be indignant.

"Well? What does it mean, Denise?" I asked. "I don't know my Neptune from your anus." I laughed alone, getting blank looks from both of them.

"It means that, if you're not careful, you'll fuck each other to death."

Mario howled with laughter, but I could detect an undercurrent of alarm in Denise's voice.

"Your meeting was probably fated," she continued. "And it won't all be roses."

I got the feeling that the subject was now closed when she returned the book to her briefcase.

During dinner, Denise and I entertained Mario with stories of Tony's more outrageous escapades. Over coffee and liqueurs, Denise and Mario found out just how far apart they were politically and almost got into a big argument. Denise, a liberal Democrat, was still enraged over what she believed was a CIA sponsored assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. Of course, she was rabidly against the Viet Nam war and participated in the demonstrations. Mario, reverting back to his gung-ho marine days, made it clear that he was a Nixon man and was pissed that President Johnson wasn't escalating the war more.

Around ten, things became rather strained, and Denise got ready to leave. I went to the bathroom in preparation for escorting her to the subway. Rejoining them, I immediately detected a hostile expression on Mario's face. I knew that Denise must have said something which upset him very much.

We walked Denise to Christopher Street, where she hailed a cab rather than take the subway.

While strolling back, I glanced at him, luring his gaze. "What did she say to you while I was in the john?"

He smiled, then looked away. "Nothing . . . why?"

"She said something. I can tell."

He sighed. "Okay. She said she'd get even with me if I ever hurt you. No big deal."

I didn't buy it, but I knew that Denise had no intention of my ever knowing what she'd said. I shrugged it off, preferring pleasant thoughts of Provincetown.

NINE

Wednesday, August 14th

We were awakened just after six with a telephone call. It was Denise and she sounded terrified. She told of being up all night doing what she called synastry and composite calculations, which she used in comparing my astrological chart with that of Mario. She emphatically warned me not to go to Provincetown. Just to get rid of her, I told her that we'd changed our minds and that I would call her later. She seemed relieved but ended our conversation with something about knowing Saturn *too well*.

Because of my unquenchable sexual appetite and Mario's insistence upon a hardy breakfast, it was midday before we were ready to leave. Just before I closed the suitcase filled with everything I thought we'd need, Mario took a few pills from his shaving kit and placed the kit on top of the clothing.

"You can leave the hard stuff here if you want. I packed some grass I bought from the bar down the street," I said.

He chuckled and shook his head, so I assumed that he was afraid his drug cache would be stolen by some burglar.

I was reluctant to take the hard drugs with us. "What if we're stopped and they search the car?"

"You worry about too much," he chided, latching my suitcase.

I shrugged. "It's your car."

He handed me a pill. "Here. Take this and you'll stop worrying so much."

"What is it?" I inspected it warily.

He frowned. "Hey, do you trust me or not?"

"I'd just like to know what . . . "

"I just took one. It's a mild amphetamine, 'cause I might need help with the driving." He smiled at my doubting look. "For crissakes, truckers take this shit all the time."

I stared at the pill.

"Hey, Pring, are you with me?"

I regarded his expression and saw a coldness crossing his face.

"I'm with you," I said, swallowing the pill and chasing it with water from the kitchen faucet.

By the time we reached the Triborough Bridge, the pill had taken effect, and I felt a sense of well-being. The hot wind felt good in my hair; all my problems seemed far behind. I was with the man I loved. The only factor that mattered was sitting next to me, and the future looked encouraging. I gave little concern to the fact that I had never previously indulged in anything stronger than liquor or weed. Overnight, I seemed to have assumed the role of someone I thought Mario wanted me to be. The real me—whatever *that* was—was left in Manhattan, and I began to suspect that the real Mario was elsewhere, too. But I just didn't give a damn.

At one of our several piss stops, he oddly offered to watch the car while I went in first. *Why not just lock it?* I thought.

As I returned from the men's room, I saw him hastily hang up the receiver of a pay phone near the car, but I pretended not to notice. Later, as we exited the Connecticut Turnpike to head for Providence, we stopped at a convenience store, and I bought some beer. I stood in the shadows by the entrance, watching to see if he would take the opportunity to make another call at a nearby phone booth, but he stayed inside the car.

As dusk came, he took another pill and offered one to me. I took it and swallowed it, chasing it with a gulp of beer. I handed the beer to him for a chaser; he took a large gulp, finishing the can. I hungrily stared at him, craving the taste of his semen.

As the speed began to work, I watched him in the faint illumination from the dash lights. I could vaguely detect an expression totally foreign to any of the others I'd seen. It seemed like the look of a basically gentle man trapped in a feral environment. Or perhaps it was the look of a feral man impersonating a basically gentle man. In any event, his eyes reflected a nuance of cold bitterness. But as the drug began to alter my brain, again I didn't give a damn. I wanted him, monster or gentleman. "How much further?"

He kneaded my leg affectionately. "Let's see. Oh, I guess another forty-five minutes or so."

"I wish I could have you right now," I said, kneading his leg in return.

He squeezed my hand gently. "Save it for later. You're going to get a big dose of me this week. I wouldn't want you to get tired of me so early."

"Get tired of you?" I sighed and propped my elbow on the back of the seat, admiring him. "Does a sunflower get tired of the sun?" I asked dramatically, surprising myself.

"Listen to this, will you?" He whistled. "A poet, huh?"

I inched closer to him. "Does an eagle get tired of warm mountain air currents?" The speed was creating a person I didn't know.

"Right on, Mayakovsky."

I frowned. "Mayakovsky?" Did he write garbage like that?"

"Beats the shit out of me."

"Then why'd you say Mayakovsky?"

"First poet that came to my mind."

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "For me, love has always been a place, the mention of which would bring about a feeling of deja vu. Maybe I knew love in a past life."

"William Butler Yeats?" Mario guessed, playfully.

"Oscar Pring Davidson . . . . But this life has been mostly void of that illusive, magical frame of mind."

"Is that all it is? Just a frame of mind?"

"My conscious mind doesn't give a clue on past experiences. Therefore I'll have to rely on empirical knowledge and, besides my father, you are the only man I've ever loved." I couldn't believe I'd said it.

He appeared to be somewhat shaken. "And how do you know you love me?" he asked softly.

I had no more control of what I said. All of it just flowed out like a stream of consciousness. "We have a karmic connection," I said dreamily. "I feel your tragedy and know it's mine, too."

We drifted off into thoughtful silence and said few words until we reached Provincetown around eleven.

The owner of the guest house was a younger man who seemed perturbed that we had arrived so late. He showed us to our rooms and opened up a sliding glass door so that we could see the view of the bay. He recited some rules and other mundane information to Mario while I walked out on the terrace and breathed in the invigorating sea air.

I heard the door shut, followed by Mario's approaching footsteps. I smelled his unique scent, just as he wrapped his large arms around me. His touch held a charge like that of an electrified fence, and I became enraptured, smothering his face with kisses. I licked the perspiration from his neck and sucked on his stubbled chin.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered, leading me into the bedroom and throwing the suitcase to the floor.

He made love to me and brought me to eruption, luring me into the green zone of ecstasy, where I floated lazily on a placid, emerald lagoon. My eyes became glazed, locked on the image of clouds against silver space. My ears were attuned to herald trumpets celebrating my love for him. I drifted out until the fanfare became a muffled wailing, soon joined by distant, rumbling thunder.

Darkness.

Anxiety surged within me, and I called for him.

Silence.

Then I sensed his essence wafting over the water, enveloping me, gently guiding me back.

TEN

Thursday Morning, August 15th

I awakened and found myself alone with no idea where I was. Then I vaguely remembered having arrived the night before. I must have been awfully high on speed, because I could only remember Mario and none of the details about the guest rooms. The bed I was struggling to get out of was king size and very firm. There were pulled drapes along an entire wall, and the room was dark except for a line of light at the bottom of the drapes. Stumbling into the larger living room, I saw a dining area off to the left, with an adjacent kitchen decorated in cheerful bright yellows and greens. To the right was a beige couch and matching love seat with two gold upholstered chairs. Beyond were the sheer drape-covered sliding glass doors and the terrace, where Mario stood in a skimpy white bathing suit with a drink in his hand. He was looking out over the bay.

I got into a pair of shorts and walked to the glass doors. Watching him through the sheer drapes, I wished that I knew what he was thinking. I pulled on the handle, and the door noisily slid open, startling him.

"Jesus, are you jumpy," I observed.

"War does that to you," he said simply.

"Tide's out," I said, looking beyond him at the sand and rocks below.

He yawned and extended his drink. "I was almost asleep just standing here. Want a sip?"

I made a face. "Scotch? A Bloody Mary maybe, but no Scotch this early."

"That's because you're a sissy. Hold this and I'll go make you a Bloody," he said, walking back inside.

"We don't have the ingredients," I said after him, adding softly, "At least I don't think we do. Hell, I don't remember *anything.*"

"I found a grocery store around the corner."

I sat on one of two wooden lounge chairs. "Good God, how long have you been up?"

"Couple of hours." I faintly heard him answer.

I had to chuckle. "After all your body endured, you have the energy to get up early? The only reason I stopped devouring you was because I was afraid you'd sleep all day. You're supposed to be pushing fifty, not thirty!"

"I can't hear you!" he yelled from the kitchen.

"Somebody pinch me, 'cause I know I'm dreaming," I said to myself. I felt my chin and worked my jaw back and forth. It was awfully sore. I probed my anus and winced in pain. "Jesus, I won't be able to walk *or* sit after this weekend."

A door slid open on the adjacent terrace and a very well-built Oriental Adonis walked out totally nude, stretching and closing his eyes to the sun. He looked Korean and seemed to be in his late 20s.

"Kim, put some clothes on. This isn't Land's End," a voice came from inside.

"Hi," I greeted.

He turned suddenly, then placed his hands over his genitals and backed inside. I couldn't keep from laughing and was still chuckling as Mario returned with two Bloody Marys.

"Who are you talking to?" He handed me a drink and sat in the other chair.

"Some Asian guy next door. He came out stark naked."

"No kidding." Mario chuckled.

Kim returned in a swim suit and waved sheepishly. "Beautiful day."

"Are you Korean?" I asked.

"Yes. You're Oriental, too, yes?" He spoke with an accent much thicker than mine.

"Half Thai."

"I'm Kim, and my friend's name is Frank. He's coming out soon. Kim is actually my last name, but my friends use it as a first name."

"I'm Pring and this is Mario."

Mario waved and smiled.

"I never heard of the name Pring. It's beautiful," said Kim.

"It's my mother's maiden name."

Mario looked at me as if he'd wanted to ask the same question.

"Are you staying long?" asked Kim.

"Until Sunday," I answered. "You?"

"We go back to San Francisco tomorrow."

"San Francisco?" I was amazed. "And you came here for a vacation?"

"We were in Europe. We thought we'd adjust to the jet lag here and check out the East Coast scene. You know San Francisco?"

"I lived there for a short time," I said, glancing at Mario's surprised expression. "I love it there."

Kim's lover, Frank, stepped out onto the terrace and waved. He was fiftyish, mostly bald and chunky, with friendly, soulful eyes.

"Baby, meet Pring and Mario. Pring is half-Siamese," introduced Kim. "This is Frank."

"Hi," said Frank. "Where're you guys from?"

"New York," I said. "I detect a trace of New York in your accent."

"I lived there for over ten years," he admitted. "I'm originally from Hartford. I went to San Francisco on business and met this one four years ago." He smiled warmly at Kim. "I never came back."

Kim blushed, which I found refreshing and touching. They were obviously very much in love.

"Are you too . . .?" Frank began.

"Yes," I said without hesitation, noticing that Mario glanced at me and smiled. "This is our honeymoon."

"Jeez," Mario quietly moaned with a painful expression. He shook his head.

"Say, how about that?" Frank said to Kim. Then to Mario he asked, "How do you like being married to an Oriental?"

Mario was embarrassed but went along gamely. "Are they *all* horny?"

I threw an ice cube at him, bringing a laugh from our neighbors.

"I don't know," Mario continued. "He doesn't act Oriental."

"Kim's only been in this country for six years. He could barely speak English when we met."

"He's trying to say that I still act like a P.D.," interjected Kim.

"D.P.," corrected Frank.

"Oh, yes—D.P." Kim giggled. "Displaced person."

"Care for a Bloody Mary?" I asked, finding them charming. I glanced at Mario, whose expression strongly indicated that he didn't want to get involved with them.

"No, thanks," Frank said. "We're going to drive down to Hyannis for lunch. Want to join us?"

"Ahh, I guess we'd better not," said Mario, apparently sensing that I thought it was a good idea and wanting to squelch it fast. "We're just going to take it easy and get some sun the first day."

"We should be back around mid-afternoon," interjected Kim. "How about dinner tonight? It could be sort of a bon voyage party before our flight out tomorrow."

Again Mario quickly spoke, cutting me off. "That would be great, but we already have an invitation." He glanced at me and winked with the eye Kim and Frank couldn't see. "Thanks anyway."

Kim and Frank glanced at one another, obviously aware of Mario's brush-off. I was so embarrassed that I fell silent.

Frank broke the big pause. "Well, Kim-Chee, my love, we'd better start getting dressed. It's a long haul to Hyannis."

Kim returned my sad gaze. It all seemed so perfect for a lasting friendship. Two younger Orientals with older Anglo lovers. As they waved and went back inside their quarters, I felt angry at Mario for the first time.

"Are you disappointed?" Mario eventually asked, after studying my expression for several moments.

"Yeah." I turned to him. "I am. They look like they'd be fun, and it would have been for just one evening."

"I'm sorry, Pring, but I just don't feel comfortable in the gay scene. What we do in bed is one thing, but going out in public and telling the world that you're one of the boys . . . well, that's too much for me."

I tried hard not to appear to sulk, but I just couldn't think of anything to say.

He stood up. "I think I'll go take a shower. You want to join me?"

I nodded and lifted the glass. "I think I'll finish the drink first. I'll be right behind you."

He seemed to be concerned about how I felt and placed his big hand on my shoulder before going back inside.

I sipped my drink and wondered what it would be like,

having a life-mate and a group of close friends. I imagined throwing intimate dinner parties and having Cognac around a cozy fire inside a nice house in the suburbs. I envisioned a couple of golden retrievers and a cat, maybe an aquarium filled with tropical fish. I thought of Kim and Frank and found myself grieving over the fact that I would never get to know them.

A sea gull glided down onto Kim and Frank's terrace railing and watched me warily.

"Hello," I greeted.

"Hi, fool," I spoke for the sea gull.

"Catch a lot of action on these terraces?" I asked, watching the gull inch closer until it had reached the corner. It peered into our terrace for food, never losing track of me. "Have you ever been in love?"

The sea gull responded by expelling an ugly blob of white and brown bird shit on the railing.

"Bitter, aren't we?"

A breeze came in from the bay and the gull flew away. I became entranced with staring at the other birds and the bay and lost track of time.

A stronger breeze lifted me from my reverie, and I noticed that Mario was standing nude at the terrace entrance. The drapes billowed into him, creating a veiled, sultry image. He took a step forward, exposing his soft tan eyes and parted, moist lips.

I slowly went to him and lightly touched his chest through the drapes. He gasped for air at my touch. I parted the drapes and we stood face-to-face, my fingers slowly rolling his nipples. I licked his chin and let my tongue glide down his throat, around his bull neck, then back to his chin. As my fingertips traced the outline of his torso, he began to tremble. Leisurely, I circled behind him and breathed hot air into the hair on the back of his head, then continued downward with my tongue, under each shoulder blade, down his spine, into his crevice, around his sphincter, down and up one leg and down the other. Gently, he pulled me up and led me into the bedroom.

As I lay on my back, he hovered over me, trembling so hard that his teeth chattered. He kissed me lightly on my forehead, nose, each eye and chin. His tongue spiraled around my open mouth as he embraced me. Then we were on our sides, and he feasted upon my mouth, kissing me deeply as never before. He began to faintly moan with a resonance which seemed to vibrate and electrify my entire body. I was being played like a musical instrument, and we became lost in a massive Wagnerian crescendo. Our bodies seemed to condense down to a common mass of flesh, as if we had briefly become a single cell. Separating into two forms again, we began the mutual assault on breasts, progressing to navels, then cocks, until the crescendo reached its pinnacle and we climaxed together, our cries silenced within a labyrinth of sinus cavities.

ELEVEN

Friday Morning, August 16th

Hung over from the speed and still exhausted from a walking tour of the old town the previous afternoon, Mario slowly made his way to the terrace, where I served him coffee and a Bloody Mary. I was in better shape since I had only taken one pill and was in better physical condition. Of course, he had no idea that I had pretended to take two more pills to match his consumption.

While he nursed his Bloody Mary and dully watched the bay activities, I prepared a brunch consisting of eggs benedict, strawberries and "Cordon Rouge" champagne.

When I served it on a plastic tray, he stared at it and shuddered. "I thought you wanted to get high today."

"We have to eat," I said, digging in with a fork. "We need fuel."

"We can do both."

"I think I'll lay off for awhile," I said, not looking at him. "I'm feeling some extra heart beats."

"Last night in bed you said you were ready to try morphine."

"I did?" I said playfully.

"Yes, you did." He said it seriously, as if greatly disappointed.

"It must have been in the throes of passion," I laughed. "I'll agree to anything when you make love to me."

I got the impression that what I had just said profoundly registered in his mind. The only thing missing was a light bulb going on over his head. "Okay," he said, studying me as I hungrily consumed my food.

After we finished eating, a large, red and blue sailboat glided by, and we both became transfixed by it.

"How would you like to live in California?" I asked, breaking the silence.

He frowned at me, half smiling, clearly telling me that I had struck a nerve. "Who wouldn't?"

"Would you go with me?"

He laughed. "Now?"

"Why not?"

"To get away from Nick?"

"Among other things."

He looked at me with a hint of amazement. "Nick would find me."

"How come he hasn't already?" I asked, looking straight into his eyes.

He poorly feigned a yawn. "I haven't been gone that long."

"Why would he even want to find you? Because you know the game plan?" I carefully studied his reaction. "Doesn't he trust his own brother?"

"He owns me."

"Bullshit, Mario," I said, startling him with my insolence. "I could understand what you're saying if you'd agreed to testify against some mob big shot. Surely Nick couldn't find you on his own . . . and what reason would he give the family to get help finding you?"

"There are other ways," Mario said softly, patiently.

"There's something more, isn't there?" I asked at length.

He nervously sipped his champagne. "What makes you think that?"

"I don't know. It seems like you're in more trouble than you're telling me. *Did you* threaten to testify against a big shot?"

He laughed so spontaneously that I knew I was on the wrong track. "Jesus, stop thinking so hard. Maybe that's the reason you're talking in your sleep."

"Really? What did I say?" I allowed him to change the subject, was actually relieved he did.

"Gibberish. You remember dreaming last night?"

"Yeah. It's my recurring 'white room' dream."

"White room?"

"It's crazy. I'm in this white computer room and I converse with the computer through a keyboard and monitor; I

meet strange people and animals."

"What does the monitor tell you?" he asked, visibly more relaxed.

"Riddles, mostly. What do you dream about?"

He thought about it. "I don't dream very much. I used to dream about my parents after they died. I had nightmares in Korea."

"What was Korea like? How does it compare to what you hear about Vietnam?"

Mario's mood quickly became somber. "It was a completely different war, more like World War Two. The only similarity is the carnage and a president holding us back from winning the goddamned thing. I never thought I'd see so much suffering and pieces of bodies everywhere. It never made too much sense to me—all the killing. I developed this paranoia about all Asians after fighting the Japanese in the big war and the North Koreans and Chinese in Korea." He looked at me and smiled. "Seems strange that I'd come back and have an affair with one. I guess I had a romantic attitude about the marines. Boot camp was sort of fun because I was gung-ho and away from Nick. I really believe that I thrived on the hard training and all the violence. It was also a way to suppress the thing about being attracted to men and all. Then, when we shipped out for the Pacific and I had my first taste of battle, it turned me into a killer, I think. I actually relished the beach assaults in a perverse way. Maybe that's why I stayed in the marines and volunteered for action when the Korean War broke out. Blood lust, I guess."

"How did you get into drugs?" I could see the defenses rising in him again. "They didn't have the drug problems in Korea that they do in Viet Nam, right?"

"I got a lot of morphine in Korea after I was wounded. Then when I got discharged after Korea, I came back to a big brother who dealt everything in the book. It was available, it felt good . . . and I was bored."

"So you're addicted?"

He laughed, almost choking on the champagne. "What a misconception. How many people do you know that smoke grass?"

"Just about everyone my age or younger, I guess." I remembered how wild it got at the magazine with all the smoking in the stairwell and toilets. I lost track of how many times someone would go into a subway john to smoke a joint.

"And how many people do you know that drink? Huh? And all these Dudley Do Rights who booze it up every night try to tell us that pot leads to hard drugs and that all hard drugs are addictive. You'll find the same percentage of alcoholics to social drinkers as you do junkies to recreational drug users. Hell, I'm not addicted. I can take it or leave it. I haven't had smack or morphine in months, for crissakes."

I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Why are you laughing?"

"You're such a contradiction! You love Nixon and war, yet you're such a liberal when it comes to drugs."

"I just call my own shots, that's all," he said, trailing off.

Although I was impressed with his opening up to me, I still didn't want to join him in the drug feast. Memories of the effect the speed had on me were frightening, and I could envision becoming at least psychologically addicted to it. Speed turned me into a different person. I became fearless and reckless. "So what's Nick like?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Nick?" A look of admiration tempered by fear and perhaps a little loathing came to his face. "He takes the cake, man. I guess we have this love-hate relationship. I remember times when he'd play football with me when I was a kid and let me ride on his shoulders. Those times were few and far between, though. It's hard to figure, you know, because he had two daughters and I was the son he never had. It was like he was afraid to show affection, even with his daughters."

"Why do they call him Nicky The Horse?" I couldn't resist asking him.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Tony," I lied, remembering that Denise had told me.

"Because he's hung like a horse and pretty proud of it. Maybe that's why he held me at arms length when I was a kid. I used to think up excuses to be in the bathroom when he was showering. It fascinated me. I think he got some perverse pleasure out of exposing himself to me, though. A couple of times he got hard and got all flustered—like he felt ashamed of getting a hard-on in front of a minor."

"Think he might be a switch hitter?"

"He's an exhibitionist," answered Mario. "It has nothing to do with male or female preference. He gets his kicks showing it. He can't say no when a broad gropes him, or if anybody—male or female—asks to see it. You should see him at parties. Oh, sure, he likes beautiful women, but he'll fuck a glory hole if he thought a hot mouth was on the other side."

"I heard he's gotten off with rape and murder."

Mario's expression became defensive. "Tony's got a big mouth." He seemed hesitant, but continued. "Nick's gotten away with a few things. He has connections with the politicians—or *had* until recently. Now all he can muster is small-time shit like personalized license plates and fixed speeding tickets."

NS 1 surfaced in my mind.

"Jeez, I'm getting sleepy," he said, yawning. "I think I'll take a nice hot shower and take a little nap, okay?"

"How about a little side tour to Boston today?"

Mario stood up and stretched, then walked inside. "You promised to try the morphine today, remember?"

I followed him. "After we get back from Boston, okay? We could take the shuttle and get there in less than thirty minutes."

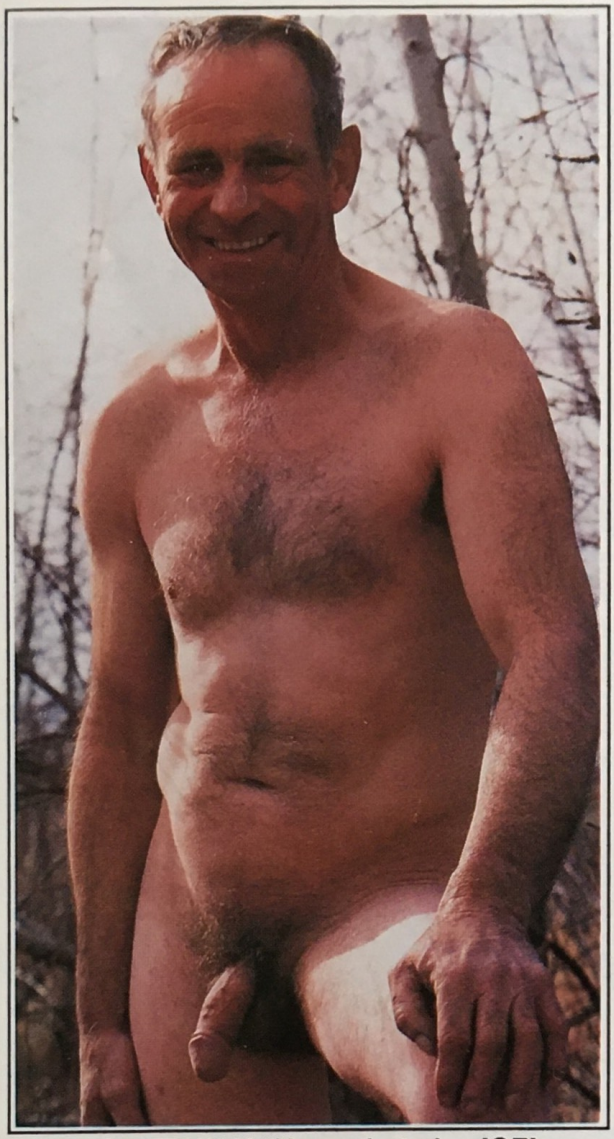
"You got to get over your fear of the shit, Pring. You're either with me or you're not."

Exasperated, I watched him go into the bathroom to shower. Knowing I couldn't get out of it, I checked in the kitchen and found that we didn't have enough food for dinner that night. Slipping into a T-shirt and sandals, I grabbed my wallet and headed for the grocery store on the corner.

The store was fairly small, like one of the neighborhood stores in Manhattan. It had only six aisles, with a small meat and delicatessen counter at one end, a dairy case at the other, and a produce section in back. I went first to the dairy section to gather an assortment of cheeses. As I picked out a tin of Camembert, I had the feeling I was being watched. Glancing around the store, I saw an elderly couple at the check out, a young man inspecting tomatoes and a thirtyish Asian about my height and build, reading the label on a box of cereal.

Completing my shopping, I checked out and walked back toward the guest house. I felt a chill go down my spine and stopped to scan the area. The street was empty except for the Asian, who was walking in the opposite direction empty-handed. He disappeared around a corner, and I heard a car door slam, followed by the sound of a car driving away. Quickly, I walked to the corner and looked down the street, just as a dark blue

(continued on page 31)



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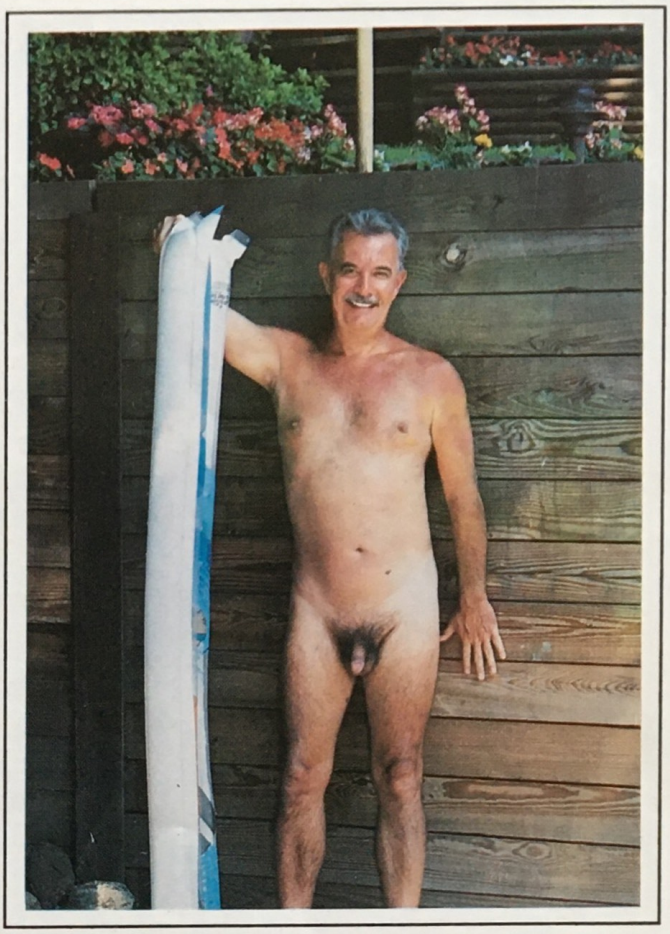

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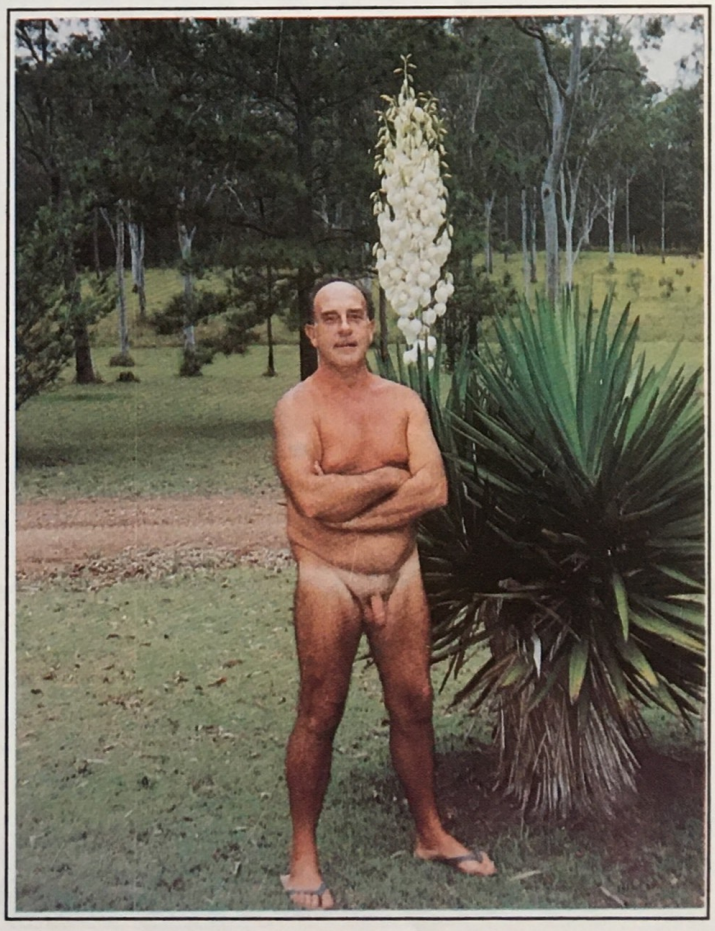
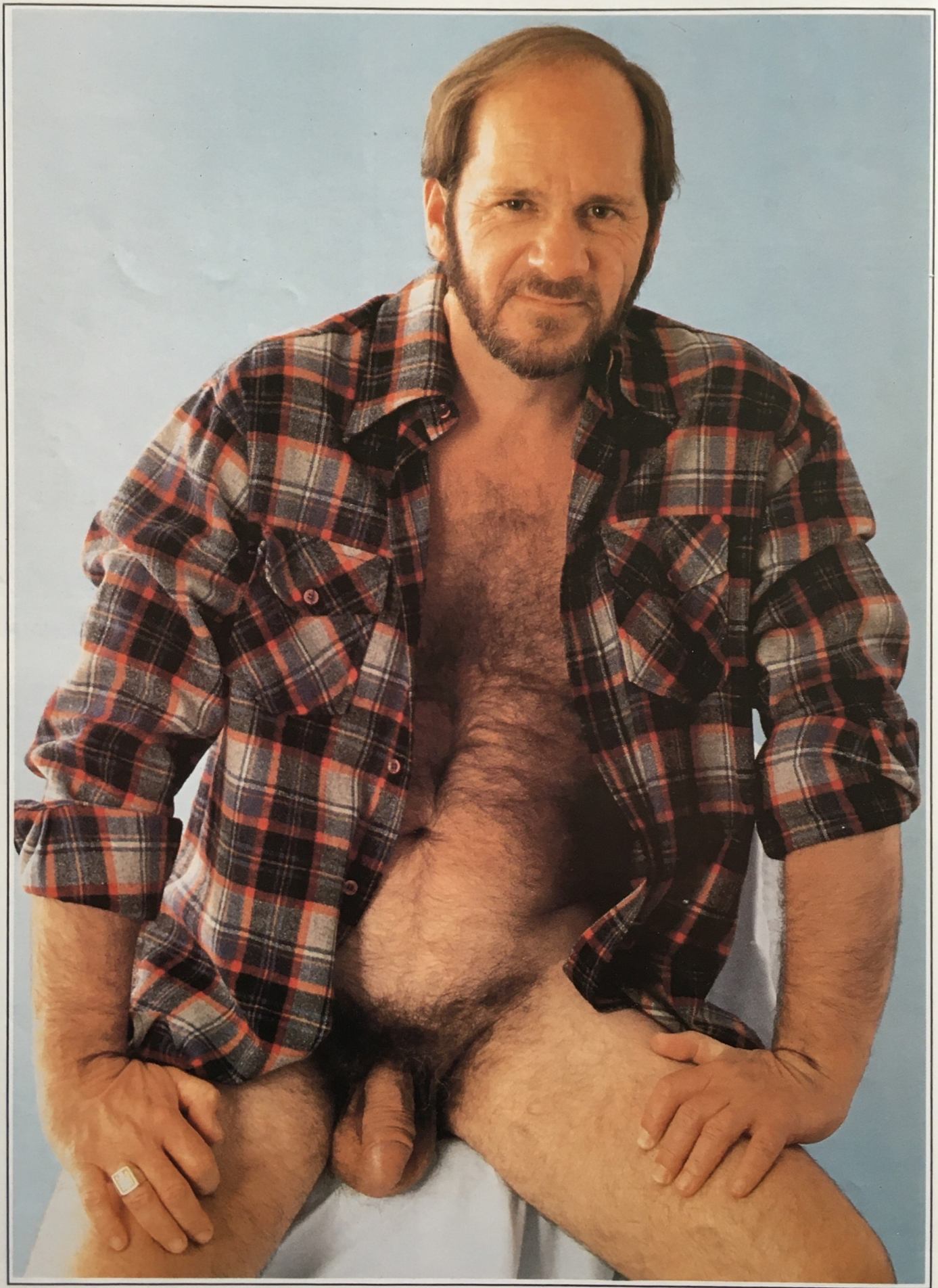


RAY W. . . . photo by BLAIR

MICHAEL



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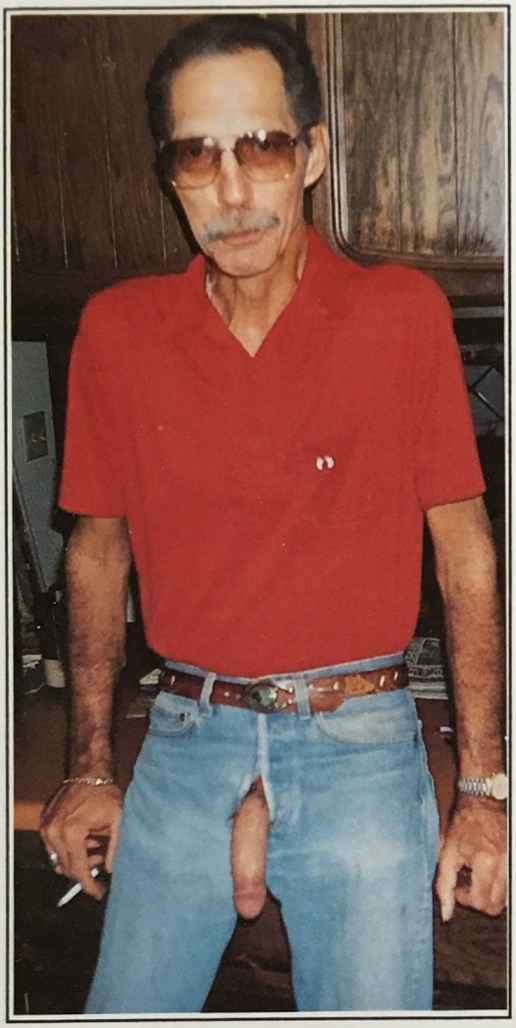
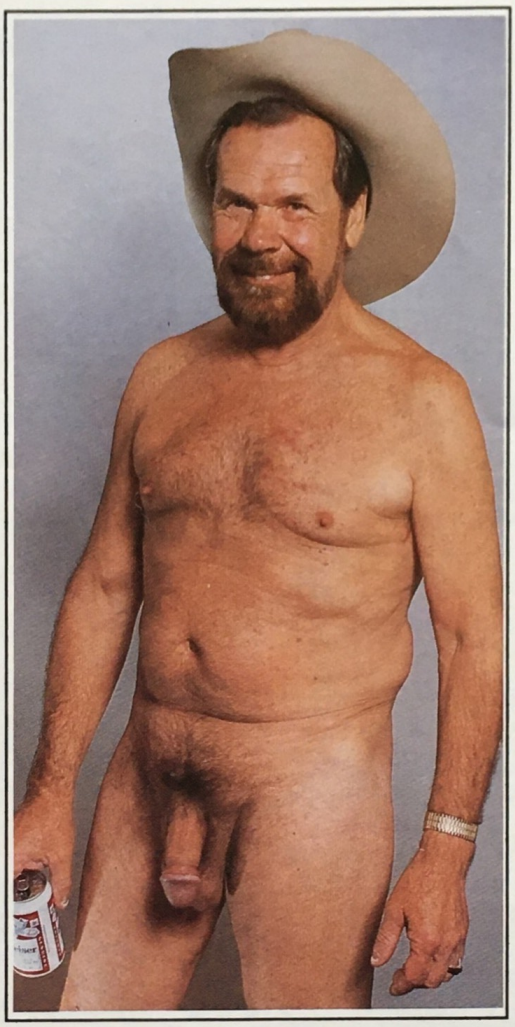


GARY . . . photo by JOEL



J.J. II . . . photo by DENNIS

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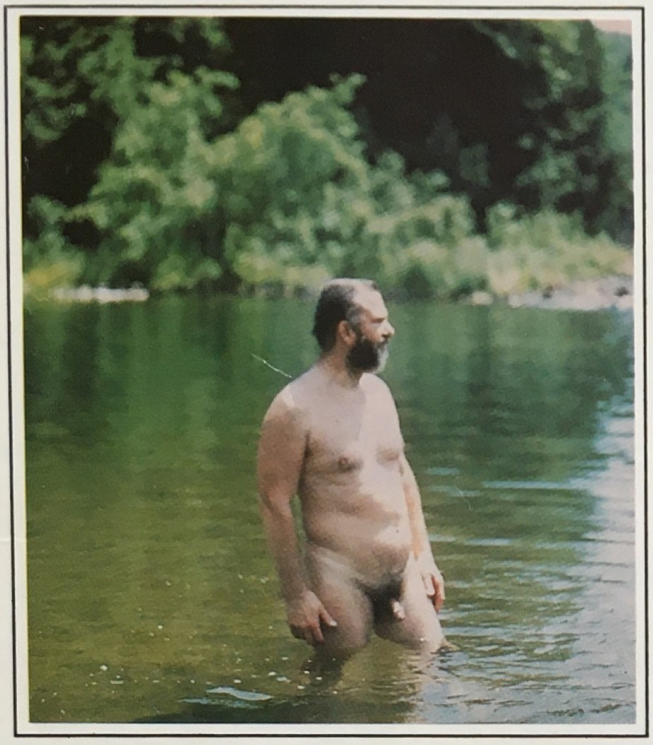
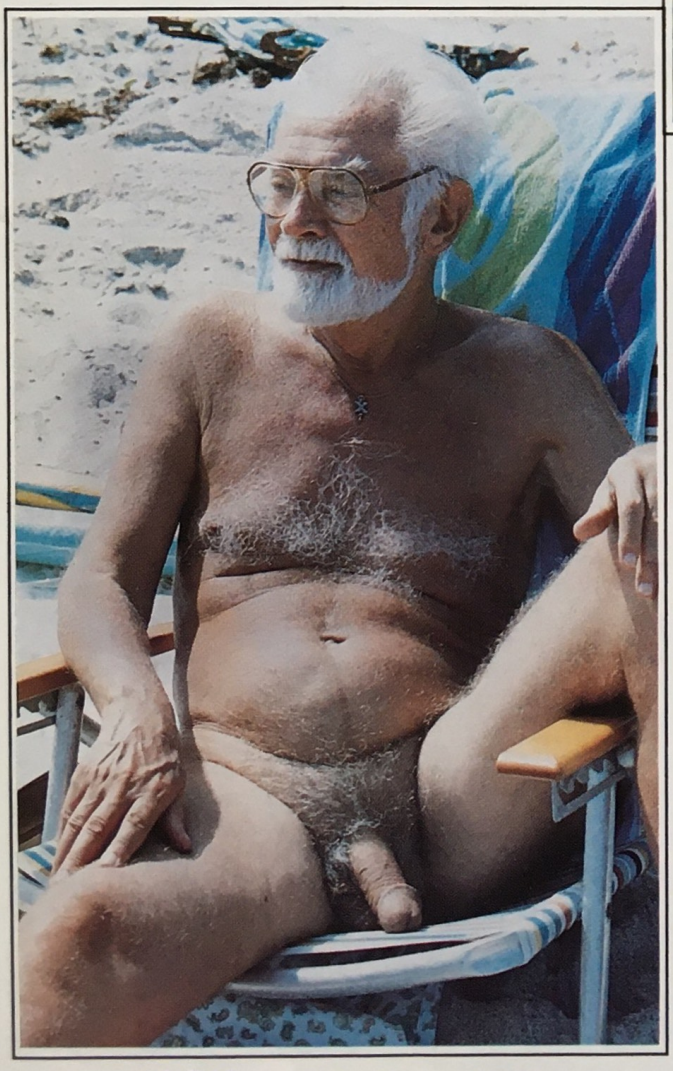
BAREKAT . . . photo by DENNY



ARNIE . . . photo by JOE

RAY T. and TUCK . . . photo by JOEL



JACK . . . photo by JOEL

BIG "D" . . . photo by P.H. COLLEY

sedan turned a corner several blocks away.

While I put the groceries away, I heard Mario snoring in the bedroom. I began to fantasize some unique way to seduce him and got a great idea.

While Mario continued to sleep, I gave myself an enema with a rubber syringe I'd thought to bring along and was relieved to find that my rectum was empty. Next, I took a shower, then splashed myself with a light cologne provided by our host. Lying on the couch in the living room, I massaged my sphincters with KY and worked a quantity inside. The muscles stretched and relaxed, I stood in the bedroom doorway and whispered Mario's name again and again until he stirred.

Gently pulling away the sheets, I slipped between his legs and began licking his testicles. He smiled without opening his eyes, and I focused on his cock as it began to grow. When it reached shiny erection, I slithered over him and guided his full girth into me.

He smiled ecstatically as I fluidly moved up and down, squeezing him with my anal muscles as I rose, relaxing as I descended. Incredibly, he yelled out in premature climax and arched his back, raising me at least a foot higher. His powerful body coiled, and his body hair seemed to crackle with electricity. Even more incredibly, I came spontaneously, shooting jissom over his chest and even across his jaw.

Staring at each other in awe, we both kissed and held on tightly, ultimately drifting off to sleep.

I awakened with a stinging sensation in my right hip and watched as Mario pushed the needle of a hypodermic syringe into the top of a morphine bottle, drawing liquid. Smiling down at me, he expelled air from the syringe and injected it into his thigh.

"You were determined, weren't you?" I said, resigned to it.

An eerie feeling slowly spread throughout my body, and it wasn't long before I began to feel a profound sense of well-being.

As the sun began to set, we sat on the terrace holding hands. I felt like I was part of the sunset—that I was slowly being pulled over the horizon toward California and the Pacific Ocean beyond. "Isn't it beautiful, Mario?"

"Beautiful."

"It's even more beautiful when it sets over the Pacific."

"I'm sure it is."

"Let's go to California, Mario."

"Sure . . . . Why not?"

TWELVE

Saturday, August 17th

We lay basking in the sun on the beach near the lighthouse. We were fairly stoned on grass. The beach, deserted earlier, was now crowded with mostly non-gay tourists and kids, and I was about to suggest that we move to the more isolated and inaccessible oceanside beaches south of town.

I sat up and gazed out over the bay, which was loaded with sailboats, yachts and tankers bound to and from Boston. I viewed the scene as if someone had placed a diffuser filter over my eyes and wondered if Mario had spiced the grass with some sort of hallucinogen.

I scrutinized Mario's powerful body as he was lying face down next to me. The sight of hickies on his neck made me smile. Suddenly I felt an immense urge to pull down his skimpy bathing suit and probe his crevices with my tongue. Nothing about him came anywhere near turning me off. I wanted to taste the salt of his sweat, to drink his urine.

"This beach sucks," he mumbled.

"I was waiting for you to wake up. Let's claim our own private beach on the other side, near the sand dunes."

He turned over and focused on me. His face was red and bloated from sleeping on his stomach. Grunting, he turned onto his side and yawned. "Jesus, here I am, wasted, and you're just sitting there looking demurely out to sea."

I gave him a demure smile.

"I thought my cock was going to fall off," he grumbled, closing his eyes. "God, do you have an appetite."

I touched his big toe with mine, and his eyes opened again. "Wait 'till we get to the other beach and I get my moist lips around that thing again."

He groaned. "I would have to come out here with a nympho."

"Satyr," I corrected. "Nymphos are women. And you're a *Simia satyrus*, better known as an orangutan . . . a white orangutan. Let's see . . . would that be a *Simia satyrus . . . albinus*?"

"A . . . white . . . orangutan?" He rolled up his eyes. "What the hell are you talking about?" he asked, laughing.

"My recurring white-room dream featured a white orangutan once. You look like him."

He slowly pulled himself up to a sitting position, then shook like a wet dog. The sight of his heavy, symmetrical body parts flexing and undulating made me lust for him.

"I don't have that much white hair," he said, inspecting his arms and legs.

"But your face was like his," I insisted.

"They have black, hooded faces. They're ugly motherfuckers," he complained.

"They're exquisitely beautiful. I saw a wild orangutan once in Borneo. Maybe that's why I dream about beasts all the time. They're always erotic dreams. Minotaurs, centaurs, gorillas, orangutans. I wonder what the significance is?" I looked deeply into his eyes and caught a glimpse of my father.

"What do you see besides a white orangutan with bloodshot eyes?"

"My father . . . . He was the only other beast in my life."

Mario lay back on his side. "Beast? Man, are you weird." He yawned. "So what was your father like?"

I looked out to sea and conjured up a memory of how my father looked prior to his death. "Stocky . . . blue eyes, ruddy face . . . big and powerful. Most men were afraid of him. He was . . . formidable, even to me and my mother." I glanced at Mario, whose curious expression urged me on. "He was a very successful tin broker with clients all over the world. He stumbled into it after World War Two, thanks to my mother's family in Thailand. But he had a knack for it. The family helped get him started, but *he* built it into an empire."

He was about to say something, but seemed to be distracted by something I'd said. "Empire? Don't tell me you belong to some wealthy family."

"You see how I live," I said, carefully gauging his expression, hoping that he wouldn't be suspicious. "Do wealthy people live like I do?"

"Were you disinherited?" He apparently didn't want to drop the subject.

"Yes," I lied. "It's a long, agonizing story; I really don't

want to talk about it, Mario." And then I remembered the letter from the bank in Zürich and wondered if he'd been able to decipher it

He shrugged, then stared at me thoughtfully. "Was your father in the service during World War Two?" he asked after a pause.

"Yeah." I smiled as his memory sharpened in my mind. "He was about your age. Navy man. He met Mom in Singapore right after the war."

Mario nodded. "What exactly is a tin broker?" he asked.

"All I know is that he bought tin from producers on behalf of clients."

"Didn't you get involved with the business?"

I sighed. "No. We didn't have a normal father/son relationship until the year before he died. I overheard him telling my mother when I was younger that I was too effeminate. I guess he blamed her. That, and he was pretty frustrated at her inability to have more children. She became barren. It was a medical mystery."

"Only child?"

I nodded. "By the time I reached puberty, I was fantasizing about him. I guess I got carried away. I had to get away from him. So I went to New York and enrolled at Columbia. I already had dual citizenship."

He turned over onto his back, shielding his eyes with his arms. "You don't look *or* act effeminate to me."

"I guess I grew out of it. It was a glandular imbalance, probably. By the summer of sixty-one, my father began to mellow around me. You know, glances of admiration—comments about my good looks being inherited from him. I'd just finished my junior year and was back in Bangkok for the summer."

"Your parents didn't know, then . . . about your liking guys and all?"

"I think Mom did, but it didn't affect our relationship. God, she was beautiful. So poised and gracious . . . and warm and gentle. She was so upset when my dad said he was taking me to a bordello that summer. He was going to make a man out of me, you know."

"Did you go?"

"Sure. I thought maybe he'd show me how it was done. And he did. Four of us in the same bed. It was wild."

Mario shifted his weight and made a face. "In the same bed?"

"Yes," I said absently, thinking about the experience like it was happening all over again.

I hesitated telling him what had been off-limits even to Tony and Denise. I never told anyone. Tony would have laughed in disbelief. Denise would have looked at it clinically, nodded, then remarked how "interesting" it was.

Mario looked at me and smiled. "In the same bed," he prompted.

"It all seemed so . . . surrealistic," I began tentatively. "You probably won't even believe me."

"Why shouldn't I?" Mario's questioning expression seemed honest enough. It effectively related that he genuinely wanted to know and had no reason to disbelieve me.

"I lay on my back with one girl giving me head. It was awful, but I kept an erection because my father was just a foot away, fucking the hell out of the other girl. They must have been only sixteen or seventeen. He . . . he . . . grunted as he came, and then he fell onto his back next to me. His hot, sweaty skin touched mine, and I was sort of paralyzed. I didn't want to move. I didn't want it to end. Soon he was snoring, and I waved the girls away. They'd already been paid downstairs, and that's where they went. All those drinks we had sort of . . . inflamed my obsession with him, so I . . . I brazenly . . ." I began to tremble as I focused on the memory. ". . . took his limp cock into my mouth. I wanted the remnant of his load, and I gently sucked it out."

I glanced toward Mario, but held back searching his eyes. I didn't want to be distracted. I didn't want to see that he wasn't believing me. "The effect . . . the effect on me was . . . *it was unbelievable* . . . like an overpowering rush of *elation* and *passion.*" I could almost witness the incident again inside my brain, like I was living it all over again. "I took him gently . . . slowly, and soon his snoring stopped. But he didn't open his eyes . . . . He didn't make a sound . . . . He just became erect. I felt no anxiety about things like tragic, averse reactions . . . or irreversible consequences. I was . . . I was besieged by this . . . this *overpowering need* to consummate the special love I had for him. I'd never had a man before, you see."

Tears came to my eyes. "I actually wept as the sound of another climax came from his groin. I held still and let his cock pulse and pulse, filling my mouth with his virility. I swallowed and forever etched the memory of that taste in my mind. I remember the distinct flavors of alkali and fructose . . . the exotic aftertaste of . . . . What was it? Protein-rich sperm, for sure; perhaps testosterone, amino acids, fatty acids, glycerol. Whatever it was, it was from my father's body; I was eating of his flesh."

I could feel the sultriness of the night, the smells of the liquor, the essence of Bangkok. "If he knew what had happened, he never showed it after he . . . somewhat unconvincingly *awakened* a few minutes later. Granted, he couldn't look me in the eye just then, but he was able to later. And he began to look at me differently than before . . . in a good way. The balance of that summer was perhaps the most enjoyable of my life. We were never sexually intimate again, but we were always together, always laughing. It made my mother so happy to see that we'd finally become father and son."

I finally found the courage to search Mario's eyes and saw that he was enthralled. "And then I went back to my senior year at Columbia . . ." I began to cry. ". . . and never saw them again. They were . . . they were killed . . . in a . . . ."

Mario comforted me with a massaging hand behind my neck. In addition to drawing a lot of stares from those around us, the gesture dried my tears and reminded me that my life didn't end with the death of my parents. It also increased the value of Mario's stock.

Or it did until he said, "Want to do some morph?" He saw my frown and quickly countered with, "To make you feel better. That was a painful memory, wasn't it? I'm so honored that you shared it with me."

I nodded, accepting his explanation. Perhaps I even convinced myself that morphine was okay to try just once. I let the word play around in my brain, acknowledged the anxiety it cause, butl never lost track of its intrinsic evil.

The grass was recreational to me, but the morphine and coke—well, they were on the other side of the street. It was the prick before the scalpel. Abused or prolonged, it was the dominant need in broken lives—something to steal or rob for. To *kill* for.

Morph . . . morphine . . . anthropomorphic . . . . I found myself wondering if a human-like God existed.

"Want something strong?" he persisted.

"No," I said with conviction.

We got into the car and headed east through Provincetown. It began to rain hard.

"Oh, no," I moaned, looking upward to see how large the front was. It was a fairly large gathering of thunderheads.

"It won't last long. Besides, we'll have the beach to ourselves," Mario said, smiling again.

"Mario . . ." I hesitated. "Have you ever been in love with anyone?"

Stopping for a red light, he looked at me impatiently. "No . . . . I've never been in love with a woman . . . *or* a man."

"Have you ever been fond of anyone? Did you ever date one girl more than the others?"

He appeared thoughtful. "I got my first piece of ass when I was about twelve. And the more girls I fucked, the more I wanted, so I never saw any of them more than two, three times. I was probably trying to suppress something, like when I joined the marines."

"What was your first experience with a man like?"

The rain became torrential, and he squinted through the windshield, watching the red light. After it changed to green and we began moving again, he answered. "I was in Riis Park, or maybe it was Jones Beach. I must have been about fifteen. Some older guy saw me showering and started a conversation. Hell, I knew he wanted my dick, and I needed some cash. So he took me home, introduced me to a thing called a blowjob, paid me and bought me dinner."

"Did you ever get involved with a guy—you know, a fling without falling in love?"

He shook his head. "You're sure full of questions today." He smiled tentatively. "Yeah, I guess you could say I did. It was while I was in Korea." The timbre of his voice seemed to change as his memory sifted through obviously painful territory. "This young private—Preston was his name. He used to hang around me all the time. I knew he was gay as a goose, but I liked him. We were on R & R in Japan together once and I sort of let him have at it. The kid flipped over me, I guess. Later, he got his orders out and he just had to have me one more time." His expression turned bleak. "He was the one I told you about . . . the one I got caught with in that supply tent. He got prison and I got discharged after some rough brig time." He glanced at me. "You're the first man I've been involved with since."

Amazed, I fell silent.

Eventually we found a parking area with few cars. As the rain kept pouring down, we smoked three more joints, which he later freely admitted to having laced with LSD. As reality began to leave us behind, we strode off into the sand hills. The rain pounded us; lightning struck less than 200 yards away.

Reaching the top of the first dune I could barely make out the ocean through the dense rain. No one was in sight, all having taken refuge in cars or left.

Suddenly, Mario pushed me from behind, and I rolled halfway down the dune. Covered with wet sand, I shouted, "Asshole!" which got lost amidst the sound of rain and thunder, then pulled down my bathing suit, mooning him.

He tore down the hill after me, and I frantically scampered up the next dune, squealing like a child. As I reached the top, he grabbed me and threw me down that one, too. I mooned him again, then ran screaming up the next hill with Mario huffing and laughing behind me. Outrunning him to the top, I did a back flip and rolled into a water-filled depression. Then the LSD hit me hard.

Lying on my back, I held my hand up to shield my face from the chromatic rain and felt Mario lie next to me. I heard a screaming, whistle-punctuated samba and opened my eyes to a kaleidoscope of multicolored drops of rain exploding from a silver nimbus above. From the crest of the opposite dune, nine ethereal faces rose as full moons. Then nine nude and glistening male forms appeared, each playing instruments of a steel band. They played deftly while gazing serenely down on us with nebulous eyes. The roar of a thousand castanets joined in as fiddler crabs came from their holes in the sand, cracking their claws together in unison with the music.

I stood over Mario and watched in fascination as the dazzling raindrops splashed over him. His eyes seemed to become a luminous gold, and he slowly rose, doing a fluid samba as his body locked in rhythm onto mine. We danced erotically around the pond, biting each other's lips, stabbing each other with swollen cocks. As the rain hit hot skin, a rainbow of steam hovered over us.

The music rose to a frenzied pitch and sounded like Rio de Janeiro during Carnival. The clicking claws became deafening. A gigantic bolt of lightning streaked over us, striking a distant dune.

And then the rain stopped.

I felt Mario stir next to me. Sitting up, I watched as a final raindrop fell into the pond, sending tiny ripples to its perimeter of sand. I stared at the pond for what seemed like hours.

A screaming gull awakened me, and I found myself lying on the sand in an alcove near the surf. I had no idea how I got there. By the position of the sun, I realized that I'd either slept through or lost track of several hours. Mario was nude and stood atop a dune nearby, looking westward at the sunset. He projected an undercurrent of gloom, which was in stark contrast to the beauty of the sunset and his richly hued body. I could sense what he was feeling. I registered flashes of strange symbols, minute segments of thoughts. Was I receiving his stream of consciousness? I began to sob.

Startled, Mario ran down the dune and dropped to his knees, taking me in his arms. "What's the matter?"

"I love you, Mario," I said haltingly between sobs. "I know what you're trying to do, but I still love you."

He squeezed me tightly. "Calm down. It's the acid. You're gonna be all right."

"And if it doesn't work . . . ?" I tried to stop my crying. "Do you drop me then?"

He sat back on the sand and looked at me forlornly. "What?"

"I know, Mario. I know." My voice was trembling. "I know."

He picked up our nearby clothing and helped me up, leading me into the direction of the car. His eyes projected a deep sadness as he wiped the sand off my body with a towel, then gently draped it over my shoulders.

We sat inside the car, silently staring at cars entering and leaving Provincetown. Mario looked very sad and appeared to be choosing his words very carefully when he said, "I know you love me. It's a true, healthy love, and it makes me feel very,

very good. If only I could live long enough to experience it."

I stared at him dumbly, unable to grasp what he'd said.

"All my life," he continued, "I've needed someone like you: a real man who doesn't act gay, yet loves me more than life itself. If only you'd come a year sooner, before I got my head in this . . . vice . . . this fucking mess."

"All the telephone calls?" I prompted.

"To Nick." He started the car and began to drive slowly to the guest house. "He's desperate. He'll kill us both. We're the only ones who know what his plans are."

I felt acutely chilled. It seemed like there was a hidden abyss nearby in the darkness, waiting to swallow us whole. "You had no right to involve me," I said flatly.

"I know I had no right . . . . I'm sorry."

"That time I was walking during my lunch hour and the blue car . . . "

"Nick and me. I took him to see what you looked like. You said you always took a walk during lunch hour."

"The morphine?"

"Nick wanted me to get you hooked." He gripped the steering wheel tightly and stared grimly ahead.

"I got hooked on *you*, not the junk." My voice didn't sound like mine. It was dry, almost void of resonance. Again I thought of the letter from Switzerland. "The letter . . . the one from Zürich. You opened it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And?"

He shook his head. "I never told Nick about it. I figured if Nick knew you had money, then he'd make it rougher on you. He's greedy."

Back in our suite, I began packing. It was mutually understood that the vacation was over. Zipping up the suitcase, I sat on the bed and watched Mario as he stood urinating in the bathroom. Again, I began receiving his anxiety and felt squeezed, oppressed with desperation. It occurred to me that he was right. Nick would kill us both; we were in this together. It seemed so terribly fated.

He finished and leaned against the bathroom entry way with crossed arms. "I guess some of Nick's obsession got to me. I allowed myself to think that I could get you to kill Cosotro. And if you got hooked, I'd have helped you through the withdrawal. Somehow, I'd have made it up to you. I wasn't about to abandon you, Pring. I swear I wasn't."

"And how would I live with myself? Good God, Mario, I got the shakes once when I ran over a chipmunk. How would I survive with Cosotro on my conscience? Didn't you and Nick ever think about that?" My voice was rising to the edge of hysteria. "I'm not Tony. I'm passive, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly *me*!"

He closed his eyes in obvious pain. "Oh, my God," he moaned, sliding down to a sitting position. I could tell that it had finally hit him. The absurdity, insanity of it finally got through to him.

I sat next to him and held him in my arms as he wept—wept, I'm sure, like he'd never done before in his life. The death of his father and mother, Korea, the Pacific, Nick, this—all of it hit hard, and it all came out. I knew then that he had a kind heart, that he was a good man. And as he raised his swollen eyes up to meet mine, I knew what he would say.

"I love you, Pring."

At that moment, it crossed my mind that perhaps the revelation was provoked by all the drugs he'd consumed, but something in his tone gave his statement a ring of truth. And so we both arrived at a common nadir in our lives, and it all seemed so star-crossed. But those four words, "I love you, Pring," moved me more than I had ever been moved. I knew that I would cherish that memory like the one of my father and carry both to an early demise. Early, because I was sure that Nick was out there somewhere and that our lives weren't worth the empty morphine bottle lying on the kitchen counter.

"Let's not start back right now," I said softly, tears trickling down my face. "I don't want to face the future just yet. I just want to hold you for a few hours."

We climbed in bed and held each other tightly until we fell asleep.

THIRTEEN

Sunday Morning, August 18th

While Mario slept, I drove, stopping a couple of times on high ground, scanning the surroundings for the dark sedan. When both my bladder and bowels felt like they would burst, I stopped at a rest stop just inside Connecticut, pulling in and slipping out of the car without waking Mario.

I sat inside the booth but could do nothing about my bodily functions. I tried to capture pleasant thoughts, like leaving for Atlanta or Houston or Mexico with Mario. It all seemed so elementary. Nick couldn't share his plan with the other members of the "family," so if I could elude him here, how could he find us? With that idea, I had success on the john, and my muscles began to feel less tense. I knew then what I had to do. While Mario slept, I would bypass New York and head south. To hell with the job and Big Bitch and Nick and all the rest. Enough with the idealistic, Spartan existence and the stupid vow of poverty. I found him and now it was time to run like hell!

Excited, I hurriedly washed my hands and rushed outside. Nearing the car I saw that Mario wasn't there. Then I saw a familiar car parked next to the Corvette and felt my eyes being pulled to the license plate: NS 1. Mario was behind the wheel, and a man wearing sunglasses sat in the back seat. The man held a pistol to the back of Mario's head.

Mario gestured for me to get in on the passenger side.

I did so and glanced into the back seat.

"Keep looking straight ahead," said Nick with a low, wheezy voice. "You two do what I say and you won't get hurt."

"Nick, listen to me," said Mario impatiently.

"Shut up, you faggot," Nick spat. "I stopped trusting you long ago." He leaned forward to look closer at me. "I'll give you credit for finding him, though. He'll be right up Cosotro's alley."

"You might as well shoot me now," I said, somehow calmly. "I won't kill him."

Nick leaned back into the seat. "You know, I thought something was going wrong when you called me the last time, little brother. Something in your voice told me you couldn't pull this off. You're gutless."

Mario flinched and partially turned, prompting Nick to smack him on the temple with the barrel of what turned out to be a .44 Magnum. Mario recoiled in pain; a trickle of blood ran down his cheek. I instinctively reached for the door handle and felt the cold barrel press against the back of my neck.

"Drive," ordered Nick through clenched teeth. "Your 'chink' friend here has a date with Cosotro in Bridgehampton tonight."

As Mario entered the ramp to the expressway, I looked

in the side mirror and thought I saw Mario's Corvette moving. When we reached the highway, I looked again, but the car was out of sight. I could feel Nick's eyes staring through the sunglasses from the back seat. Mario drove quietly with a look of intense hatred distorting his face. Whatever love he'd once had for this man who raised him was now gone.

"Mario said that you were in love with him," Nick said, after being silent for several minutes. "That's good. Good inducement, I think. It won't be bad, you know. After you poison the scorpion, the two of you can buzz off for California and never have me to worry about again. Just think: two new, solvent, gay faces in San Francisco. Think of the possibilities!"

Of course, I didn't really believe he'd let us go. I didn't even believe we'd make Bridgehampton. Mario was like the hair trigger of a gun and sat coiled like a rattlesnake. I assumed he would eventually go for Nick's gun and that Nick would kill us both. I resigned myself to it.

"Hey!" Nick prodded Mario on the shoulder. "What's wrong with you? Cat got your tongue?"

Mario remained silent.

Nick leaned back, sucked on his teeth and farted. I opened the window, causing him to laugh loudly.

"So Tony got busted, huh?" continued Nick. "Too bad, Mario. You wouldn't have been in this situation otherwise. Tony would be in Bangkok and you'd be in California sucking cock in toilets and Cosotro would be six feet under. And I would get my slate clean and all my territories back. Ain't fate a bitch?" He chuckled softly. "It'll all work out, though. Just a few more hours and it will be done. Boy, old Cosie's gonna eat you right up. You like it up the ass? A little on the rough side? That's Cosie's M.O.: up the old dirt road." He laughed and coughed up phlegm, which he spat out the back window.

I glanced at Mario, whose expression hadn't changed. "No way," I said. "Can't you see that I don't belong here? If you want a killer, *hire* one, but don't try to recruit me . . . . I just don't have it in me."

"Impressive. Very sweet," Nick said, rubbing the barrel of the pistol against his nose. "Number one, you don't put a contract out on someone in the same family. Number two, you're perfect for the job. Hey, enjoy! You two are going to be free and rich soon!"

"Rich, my ass!" I said it rather gruffly, which surprised me. "What kind of game is this, Mario? Are you two doing a number on me? Mario?"

Mario closed his eyes with a pained expression.

"There's no way you're going to convince me that I'll live through this," I continued.

"Aw, now that's lack of faith. After all, I have faith in *you*," Nick said cordially. "I'm dropping you off at the Long Island City railroad station with the poison. That's faith, is it not? I mean, you could split, right? But you won't. Mario and me will wait for you in your apartment. Can't be seen out in Long Island, you know."

I looked into those sunglasses in utter amazement. He was so confident that it scared me. I glanced again at Mario, whose expression was unchanged.

"I don't kill for kicks, son," Nick said. "I kill out of necessity. It's business. It won't be necessary to get rid of you two. After Cosotro's dead, the only way you can survive is by keeping your mouths shut and getting out of town. Besides, Mario's my flesh and blood. I made a vow to my dying mother to raise him. And regardless of what you might think, I have my honor as a man." Nick glanced at Mario. "But then, that vow gets cancelled if he screws me, which he almost did."

Mario glared hatefully at Nick out of the corner of his eye.

We passed through New Rochelle in silence, then took the Whitestone Bridge into Queens and headed for La Guardia Airport.

I was thoroughly confused. I began to wonder seriously if Mario and Nick were in it together. And if they weren't, could Nick really kill his own brother? So what was the ace up Nick's sleeve? What could he do to insure that I would go through with it and come back? What would keep me from getting off near an airport and flying back to Laguardia for the next flight out of New York? Then it hit me. The "ace" was the man driving Mario's car behind us--the one other man recruited for this insane fiasco. Again, I looked for the car in the mirror, but couldn't spot it. I felt certain, however, that I'd seen it move.

Soon it was getting dusky and I realized that we had been driving aimlessly, killing time. I had no idea where we were. Nick had for some time given directions to turn left, then right, causing us to circle and delay. Eventually he told Mario to stop the car and park. It was an isolated area surrounded by closed warehouses and factories, dark and deserted. Up ahead about four or five blocks was a train station.

"Now listen to me, 'cause I'm only saying it once," warned Nick, quite seriously. He handed me a black capsule, three triangular-shaped pills, a photograph and a small piece of paper with writing on it. "That's Cosotro and his two punks in the picture. When he goes to the bar tonight, they'll be with him. On the sheet of paper is the location of the 'Purple Door.' If for some reason he doesn't show—and it's unlikely, 'cause he's gone there every Sunday night for five straight weeks—then take the next train back and we'll try again next week."

I held the items in my hand and felt a sensation akin to being pulled into a pool of quicksand. I turned to Mario, who looked so defeated. Our eyes met, but his could offer only regret, sorrow.

"The capsule pulls apart," continued Nick. "Just empty the particles into his drink, give him a little action and get out. Simple. The other pills are some speed to give you the balls to go through with it." He opened the back door and got out. "Talk to him, Mario. Talk to him good," he said, slamming the door. He walked a few feet away, then turned and stared at us.

"Mario?" I pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Pring," he said, helplessly. "He's got us by the nuts."

"Come on, Mario," I said, trying to think rationally. "Talk to him. You're his flesh and blood. Tell him it's crazy."

He faced me and looked at me sternly. "He's run out of options, Pring. He's a fucking seven hundred pound tiger and he's up against the wall, man. If he doesn't get Cosotro, then Cosotro will get him. He's planned this too long to back out now."

I felt very cold and confused.

"About ten seconds after he comes back, we're going to be dead if you don't agree to go through with it. We got a couple of minutes to live and you just sit there like a passive sheep."

Tears streamed down my face. "Mario, I can't," I choked. "You've got to convince him that I'm not *capable* of killing another human being."

He roughly grabbed me by the shoulders and looked at me furiously. "Cosotro's a fucking cockroach, man. He doesn't

deserve to live. *But we do!*" He searched my eyes, then released me.

"I'm sorry, Mario," I whispered.

He slumped in the seat and stared at Nick through the windshield. "I really thought you loved me. I didn't expect you to volunteer to do it, but I thought you'd do it to give us a future." He spoke in a monotone as Nick slowly started back. "Here comes a seven hundred pound tiger and the only one who can stop him is a fucking hysterical faggot." He laughed bitterly. "You say you can't kill another human being? Well, you just did, my friend. You just killed us both."

The car shook as Nick ripped open the door. "Well?" he said, wheezing, getting inside.

Mario looked at me, his mouth open in anticipation.

"I can't take a man's life," I choked, calling his bluff.

Nick must have secretly adjusted a garrote so that he could swiftly loop it over Mario's head. In a matter of a second, he had the Magnum to my face with his right hand and the garrote around Mario's neck with his left. Mario tore at the wire as it sliced into his neck. He began to make low, gurgling sounds and flailed about. In the growing darkness, I could see his eyes bulging.

"Okay! Okay! I'll do it!" I yelled. I watched in horror as Mario slumped into the seat, struggling for breath. And as I realized that Mario was not seriously hurt, I turned to Nick and felt an alien emotion: the pleasure of intensely hating him.

"You have money?" asked Nick, struggling for breath himself.

A strange, calm feeling drifted over me; I nodded coolly.

"You have fifteen minutes to catch the train."

I nodded again and glanced at Mario as he massaged his neck in pain. I placed the pills, capsule, photo and paper inside my trouser pocket and let my hand brush against my knife. I weighed my chances with the pistol still pointed at me and decided there was no other way out.

I felt substantially altered. The eerie calmness continued, and I wondered if it was the serenity of a man in a state of shock. Was it the numbness of profound hatred? As I watched the shadows and lights of Long Island streak by the window, I felt perhaps I *could* kill Cosotro. I had a preconceived image of him: a man undoubtedly like Nick—a man who placed no value on life or the rights of others.

Hearing the conductor announce that Bridgehampton was the next stop, I rose and calmly walked toward the exit. My eyes met the conductor's, and he seemed to recoil and stand aside as I passed. *Yes, I was altered.*

As the train groaned to a stop, the Asian from the Provincetown grocery store got out of his seat and hesitated as I stared at him. I walked past him, not looking back to confirm my recognition, then got off the train. Spotting a taxi, I entered it and watched the Asian as he did the same in the taxi behind me. I was convinced that he was the driver of Mario's Corvette and was there to make sure that I went through with the killing . . . and didn't call the police.

Shortly after ten, the cab delivered me to the Purple Door, a summer watering hole for hordes of vacationing gays from the city, half of which were school teachers. A bar with a dozen occupied barstools was off to the right. Tables and chairs were to the left. Beyond were steps leading to a rather large dance floor, half inside and half outside the building, with more tables and chairs around it. A Japanese garden was illuminated with paper lanterns. The place was almost packed and the dancing was spirited already.

I sat at a small table along the side, ordered a Scotch and soda from a waiter, and began scanning every face. Although I had studied Cosotro's photograph during most of the trip, I pulled it out again. It was a photograph taken with a telephoto lens, showing the mob boss talking to his two bodyguards outside the Purple Door. He'd been unknowingly looking in the direction of the camera, and his features were sharp. He was short and wiry, with salt and pepper hair. He had burning, cruel, black eyes and a pock-marked face. I could detect a subtle sneer which was shared by his rival, Nick.

After scanning all the faces in the bar, I fixed my eyes on the entrance and waited.

I slowly finished my drink and looked at my watch, which read 10:34. A party of men came in together, screaming barbs and shrill hellos to practically everyone. A few minutes later, a vicious-looking young man walked in and stood by the entrance, as if waiting for others to arrive. A slightly taller young man, more feral looking because of a long scar down his cheek, passed the first one and stood at the bar ordering drinks. Following him at a short distance was Cosotro, wearing a black turtleneck sweater, black trousers and a light blue sport coat. The three of them stood at the bar and sipped their drinks silently. Other customers backed away from them, giving them plenty of room.

My mind became lucid; my body felt tingling and strong. Finishing my drink, I boldly walked to the bar and stood less than six feet away from him. Just as I got the attention of the bartender, Cosotro glanced around at me. Ignoring him, I ordered another drink and watched with peripheral vision as he scanned the rest of the bar. Saying something to his body guards, he walked toward me, causing my heartbeat to quicken. And as I expected him to tap me on the shoulder and ask me to dance, I was shocked when he walked past me toward an extraordinarily handsome young Asian sitting alone in the back.

I watched ambivalently as Cosotro sat at the small table and began talking with the obviously shy young man. I considered it fate and became resigned to the fact that another Asian outside would probably kill me if I didn't make out with Cosotro. My chances of survival seemed less than slim.

A man got off a nearby barstool and left the bar, so I took the vacant seat. I glanced around at the *capo* and realized that a big play was in the works. I began casing the bar to see if there was an alternate way out—a way around Nick's friend, who was obviously waiting outside for me. Perhaps he knew where the alternate exit was, too, and had that covered also. I looked around again and was shocked to find that a tall blond man had joined the young Asian and that Cosotro was nowhere in sight.

"Well . . . I haven't seen you here before," came a voice from behind me.

I turned to find Cosotro pressing himself between me and the man sitting on my left. He leaned against the bar and looked at me hungrily. "You're Oriental, aren't you? Japanese? No, you're . . ."

"Indonesian," I lied, " . . . rather, half-Indonesian." I was terrified.

"Ah, Eurasian," he said, nodding his approval and undressing me with his eyes. "Where are you staying?"

I had rehearsed an answer to that question. "With a friend in Sag Harbor. He said he would meet me here around one. He had to go into New York today."

"I see," he said, scanning the bar.

Is he looking for an alternate? Did I turn him off already? "Yeah. He's a nice guy, but he's got a way to go before he can satisfy me."

Cosotro seemed less interested in me. "And what does it take to satisfy you?"

"I need a dominant type . . . someone on the rough side."

He narrowed his eyes and smiled. "One o'clock is over two hours off." He inspected his watch. "Would you care to go to my place for a few drinks?"

My heart was pounding louder, and I wondered if my face was flushed. *One balk*, I reminded myself. *Don't be too eager.* "I don't know . . . . "

Cosotro looked at me hungrily. "You won't have to teach me a fucking thing," he growled.

"How far do you live from here?" I said it as breathlessly as I could.

"I have a beach-front cottage in Amagansett, but it's only fifteen or twenty minutes away. I'll have you back in plenty of time." It was obvious that I'd really turned him on.

"Hey, if I don't get back here in time, I might have to hitch it back to Boston."

"Don't *worry*," he said, giving a raised eyebrow to his two goons.

I looked warily at the two bodyguards. "Who are they?"

"House guests." He grinned. "Ready?"

I nodded and placed my drink on the bar. I wondered which of the two Nick had secretly befriended. And since it was implied that the bodyguards had to service Cosotro from time to time, I felt a perverse surge of excitement as I envisioned one of them going down on Nick.

Cosotro and I sat in the back of the Cadillac limousine, and the two young men sat in front. The taller one, the driver, glanced menacingly at me from time to time. I assumed they were both well trained. The taller one was obviously jealous.

"By the way," I said softly. "I don't go in for three or four-ways."

"Nor do I," he assured, smiling and placing his hand on my knee. "You're really a very attractive young man. Are you a model?"

The driver glanced at me again. I didn't want to give them anything to trace me by and felt nervous about any vivid image I might be creating. "I'm an accountant for an insurance company in Boston."

The driver pulled off Montauk Highway past Amagansett and headed south toward the beach, finally entering a gravel road on the outskirts of a beach house development.

Through a light fog, an isolated, stilted cottage loomed ahead, looking like the silhouette of a cubic monster with several ten-foot legs. A faint, reddish light emanated from one of the windows, making the house appear even more ominous.

As the *capo* and I climbed the stairway to the entrance, one of the bodyguards turned on a terrace light, and both ambled on toward the beach. The tall one with the scar glanced back several times, then disappeared into the darkness. Even as I entered the cottage behind Cosotro, I could feel Scarface's eyes on me.

There was a circular staircase leading up to a bedroom loft above an open kitchen in back. In front was a rather large living room with modern, modular furniture in reds, oranges and yellows. Huge Chagall reproductions hung from the high walls, and a giant mobile of glass rods hung from the ceiling in front of the glass wall that faced the beach.

"How about a drink?" he suggested, walking toward a large, L-shaped bar which enclosed the kitchen.

"Scotch on the rocks," I said, sitting on one of the barstools. I watched him as he pulled down two glasses from the kitchen shelves and reached inside the freezer for ice cubes. One of the glasses slipped out of his hand and he quickly caught it with the other hand. "Oops," he said, smiling pleasantly.

A smile. A human smile.

The idea of poisoning him suddenly nauseated me, and I broke out in a cold sweat. I knew then that it was hopeless.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he poured Scotch into both glasses.

"Jesus, I don't know." There was no need to put on an act, because I felt like I was becoming violently ill. "Maybe you should take me back. I really feel lousy all of a sudden."

He took a sip of his drink and studied me from across the bar. "Did something turn you off?"

"No. No, it's nothing like that," I said impatiently, feeling acutely dizzy.

His eyes narrowed, and he slowly moved around the bar toward me, placing his drink at the end of the bar. "What turned you off, huh?"

"Please take me back," I pleaded, watching him circle behind me. His expression was now anything but pleasant. He sharply grabbed me by the hair and pulled my right arm behind me, pinning it against my back. "Maybe you don't think I'm rough enough, huh?"

The pain in my right arm was intense, and the nausea was soon replaced by a cold numbness in my stomach. "Okay! Okay! Let's do it."

He relaxed his hold slightly and roughly jerked me off the barstool, pushing me toward the circular staircase. "You like it rough?"

"Yes," I whimpered.

"Huh?" he jerked my arm upwards.

"Yes!" I yelled.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he abruptly pushed me toward the center of the bedroom, causing me to fall backwards onto a king size bed. Sitting up in it, I rubbed my arm and looked around the room. In one corner, a long steel chain was looped through a steel ring, which was embedded in the ceiling. Other steel rings were embedded in different areas of the walls, as well as both ends of the headboard and footboard of the bed. A large bullwhip was coiled and attached to the wall behind the bed.

"Welcome to the 'House Of Sweet Pain'," he said, pointing a .45 at my head. "Strip."

I took off my shoes as he inspected the chain hanging from the ceiling. I stood up and took off my shirt, then my trousers. He grabbed the trousers and threw them across the room, causing the black capsule and three orange dexedrine pills to spill to the carpeting. The sheet of paper hung precariously inside the pocket. My knife remained inside the other pocket. Glancing at him, I could tell that he'd not seen the pills fall out.

From a chest of drawers, he pulled out a set of handcuffs and moved closer to me as I pulled off my briefs. "Hold out your hands."

I obeyed, resigned to what was in store. My whole body began to ache in dread.

He smiled as he closed the handcuffs and led me to the

chain, which he hooked onto the handcuffs. As he pulled the other end of the chain, my arms were lifted upward until I was almost off my feet. He secured the chain somewhere outside my field of vision, then walked into an adjacent bathroom. My shoulders felt as if they were being pulled apart.

Bitter tears threatened to erupt from my eyes as I thought of Mario clawing at the garotte, struggling for breath. I imagined him sadly watching me walk to the train, then feeling the garotte again close around his neck, finally ending his life. I entertained thoughts of how Nick was planning to kill me. Glancing at the pills on the floor, I wondered how long Nick would survive if I told Cosotro everything. It was a thought! Of course, Cosotro would kill me, but it would certainly take care of Nick. But then, what if Mario was alive and turned out to be an accomplice? Of course, I wouldn't have to tell Cosotro anything if he saw the note and photo and figured out what the black capsule was.

But nothing was certain, except that I was the pawn.

Another scenario: I envisioned Mario and Nick laughing as I walked to the train, congratulating each other on a super feat of manipulation. I could hear Nick saying, "He poisons Cosotro and the big shit *capo* mutilates him on his S & M apparatus, like he's done with at least one hundred other punks. We're home free, Mario, my boy!"

I heard him enter the bedroom, then he was before me, wearing crotchless, black leather chaps; spike-embedded, leather arm bands; and a black leather falcon hood.

Marquis de Sade, himself.

He rubbed my chest, then slapped my buttocks as he bit down hard on each nipple. The pain was searing, but I remained quiet.

"Like that, you filthy cocksucker?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes," I said flatly.

"Huh?" he moaned, stroking his small, hard cock while squeezing my testicles.

"Yes," I said, trying to sound aroused as a knot of intense nausea formed in my stomach again. The pain in my groin was excruciating.

He slapped me across the face several times, laughing shrilly. "Hey, you *do* like this, don't you? Huh?"

"Yes," I said, feeling a strange, soothing numbness crawling up my legs.

"You want Daddy to take a switch to you?" His voice had risen to a falsetto pitch.

"Yes, Daddy," I said, acutely feeling an overpowering sense of rage as the pain began to retreat. And then I felt the cool, sweet desire to kill him. It wasn't something that converged on me; it was something *awakening* from within—something dark and evil.

He ran to the chest of drawers and pulled out a small, leather whip. Wide-eyed, he circled behind me and viciously whipped my back and buttocks again and again. Eerily, I reached erection and began to gyrate. "Yeah, Daddy. That's it, Daddy."

I could hear him whimper as he probed my ass with trembling, wet fingers and threw the whip on the floor. Soon, he was on his knees, biting my buttocks and sloppily licking my anus as he squeezed my testicles again. Scrambling to his feet, he probed with his fingers and rammed the whip handle inside me. For what seemed like hours, he spastically fucked me with the handle while masturbating. He created sounds in his throat that I'd never heard from a man.

Suddenly throwing the blood-covered whip to the floor in front of me, he pushed his cock into me and climaxed, screaming into my ear and digging his fingernails into my chest. Then he quickly pulled away and staggered into the bathroom. As he showered, I stared longingly, lovingly at the black capsule.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he was composed and wore a bathrobe. Casually, he unlocked the handcuffs and gestured toward the bathroom. Hobbling there, I gazed into a mirror at my bruised nipples and the bleeding scratches on my chest. My face was red and puffy and my back had long, hideous welts. Opening a cabinet, I found a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and splashed it on my wounds, feeling renewed pain. Then I sat on the commode and expelled his jissom, as well as a small quantity of blood from a tear in my sphincter.

As I walked out of the bathroom, Cosotro was holding the pills and smiling at me. I felt a rush of panic and quickly looked at my trousers, which still had the paper hanging out.

"What do we have here? Speed freak, huh?"

I looked indifferently at the pills, then began gathering up my clothes, carefully pushing the paper further inside my pocket. As I dressed, he studied me, and I decided it was time to ensure that I got out alive. "Could I see you again?" I asked casually.

He smiled lecherously. "Sure. You were pretty good." He shrugged. "At first I thought you were a dud, but you exonerated yourself."

"You were great." I forced an admiring smile.

"How often do you get down from Boston?"

"For you, anytime."

"I'll give you my number," he said, putting the pistol inside his belt and leading me back down the stairs.

He placed the pills down on the kitchen counter and printed a telephone number on a piece of scratch paper.

I nodded toward the pills. "I don't mind you keeping the 'dexies,' but I'd really like the 'black beauty' back."

"What is a 'black beauty'? I'm only into the hard shit."

"It's the best speed you can buy," I said, not knowing if there was such a thing. "It keeps you going like a fucking bull for twelve hours. Costs a fortune."

"Oh, yeah?" He sneered at me and popped it inside his mouth, chasing it with Scotch. "You can keep the others," he said, handing me the dexedrine tablets and the paper with his number on it.

I forced a look of disappointment.

As I sat in the back seat, the shorter bodyguard silently drove me back to the bar. Only once did I look into the rear view mirror at his eyes, which reminded me of those of a wolf.

As the limousine's tail lights disappeared, I walked inside the bar and called a cab. I had only thirty minutes to catch the last train to Manhattan.

FOURTEEN

Monday Morning, August 19th

I knew that I was in my neighborhood bath house, but I couldn't remember how or when I'd arrived. I lay there for hours in the tiny room, staring up at the ceiling, thinking of how beautiful the name Soleriani sounded. It sounded transcendental, like "soliloquy" or "soul" or "solipsist." At that moment I indeed felt totally alone in the universe, like a solipsist. I

wondered where Mario's soul was and if mine would join his soon, for I knew that I was doomed.

And with doom comes madness, my pet, I thought. *Upset stomach, Cosie, honey? Just take a little Pepto-Bismol and it'll all go away.*

Dead soon: Pring Oscar Davidson, gentle Amerasian lover of beasts.

A couple of guys were going at it in a distant room; I could hear the sound of loose, wet testicles slapping against a bare ass. The sounds of moans and flatulence came, then someone climaxed and cried out. I couldn't stand it. I had to leave.

The eastern sky was turning magenta and illuminated the empty street with rosy half-light. Alone with the pigeons, I walked aimlessly until I came upon a subway station and took a train to 59th Street. I walked into Central Park until I came upon a huge rock. It was a place I had admired before because it seemed so peaceful. Sitting atop the rock, I listened to the gentle breeze flowing through the trees.

The wind caressed my face, whispering to me in riddles. A gust came and swirled about me, then whistled through the tree branches above me.

"*Soleriani*," wailed the wind.

"Do you have him?" I whispered.

Then the wind became a lonely soliloquy, like "Syrinx," an unaccompanied flute piece by Debussy.

I sat entranced for some time, then began to realize that people were milling about. I wasn't alone in the universe after all, but I might as well have been. Another gust of wind brought a remnant of a carousel's waltz, then another. I went to search for the carousel.

Children were there, waiting to ride it to reedy waltzes. How sad the waltzes, I thought, as an attendant loaded the huge machine to capacity and started again. It sang a song with several verses, telling in riddles where Mario Soleriani was. I studied the riddles, trying to sort out the meanings.

It was late afternoon when I reached my apartment. As I neared the door, I could see that it had been forced open, but I entered anyway. I had an idea of what lay ahead and, sure enough, I was greeted with a familiar .44 Magnum. Indifferently, I walked past Nick and gently sat on the couch.

He smiled and lowered the pistol. "You did well. He died at ten-thirty this morning, and, if we're lucky, everyone will think it was a heart attack." He was drunk with joy.

"You going to shoot me now?" I asked indifferently.

Nick sat in a chair and placed the pistol inside a chest holster. "Shoot you? I could kiss you . . . . Hey, I'm a man of my word."

I looked at him suspiciously.

"Mario went home to pack after we heard the news. He was real worried about you. Really digs you, you know?"

"Mario was here? He's alive?" I was dumbfounded and felt a guarded elation beginning to surge in me.

He grinned. "Of course. You really think I would kill my baby brother?"

"But the garotte . . . in the car . . . "

"Good acting. What can I tell you?" He sucked on his teeth and smiled. "You did the world a favor killing that cocksucker."

I tuned out. Myriad emotions rampaged through me, and to retrieve a single thought seemed sure to short-circuit my brain.

"Get packed now. I'll take you to meet Mario at Newark Airport. I'll arrange to ship your furniture and shit when you get settled."

Numbly I walked to a closet and pulled out a suitcase as he placed a call.

"Hey, Mario! Plan 'A.' See you at Newark Airport. Yeah, he's fine. No, you can't talk to him because we gotta hurry."

I rushed to talk to Mario, but Nick had already hung up. "No time for that sentimental shit. Let's go."

As we inched bumper-to-bumper through the Holland Tunnel, I could smell gasoline and wondered if it was from the tunnel or the two red cans I thought I saw in the back floorboard as I got inside. Nick had thrown my large suitcase over them, probably to keep me from seeing them. Exiting the tunnel in New Jersey, he avoided the Turnpike, which would have taken us directly to the airport. Then I realized that we were in an old, beaten up Chevrolet—an expendable car. The kind you burn. Coupling that with the fact that my apartment door had been busted open—strange, since Mario had a key—I felt it was safe to assume that we weren't going to Newark after all.

"There's a big bottleneck on the Turnpike up ahead," he said, watching me uncomfortably. "Heard it on television at your place."

"I have no idea where we are," I lied. "Gee, just think. California. It's like a dream come true." Then the mind blower: "You know, Cosotro really hurt me. I almost backed out until he hurt me. Then it was easy." I glanced at him and managed, I hoped, a mad smile. "I enjoyed killing him after that."

He looked even more uncomfortable.

When he turned onto Highway One and Nine, heading north, I had no doubts about his plans for me. I thought of the cans of gasoline and knew that I had to reach him first. I watched him askance and could sense just how tense he had become. Then I looked at his crotch and suddenly knew how I could survive. A long shot, but I had to try.

"Why do they call you 'Nicky The Horse?'" I asked, smiling.

The question caught him off guard and, glancing at me, he almost hit a car in the next lane. He actually blushed. "I got a big dick . . . . Why?"

"How long will it take Mario to get to Newark?" I stared brazenly at his crotch. "He's got further to go than we do."

He frowned, obviously wondering what I had in mind.

I reached over and groped him, causing him to flinch and almost lose control of the car again. "I hope you never tell Mario, but you really turn me on. I go nuts over straight guys with big cocks."

He hesitated a little too long, then roughly brushed my hand away, warily watching me in short, nervous glances.

"Why don't we pull off and find a nice, secluded spot. I'm dying to suck your cock."

The import of my remark registered in his eyes, and I could tell that my suggestion made the whole killing affair much easier for him. The whole charade was designed to get me to stupidly go along like a lamb to slaughter anyway. Had it been just a matter of simply killing me, he could have done it back at the apartment. It was obvious that my body was worth something, and it was surely easier to deliver a live one—*to a secluded spot*— than a dead one, especially in broad daylight. I could see then why he was so nervous. After all, I could have caused all kinds of havoc by grabbing the steering wheel. The

thought even occurred to me; but the percentages weren't too good. Cars can kill as easily as a pistol. The chances of survival were better, I reasoned, where he was going anyway: "a nice, secluded spot."

I groped him again and buried my face in his warm crotch, exhaling warm breath. He squirmed uncomfortably. I knew that no man could excite Nick with a proposition and one grope, regardless of what Mario had said. I could see in his eyes that he had no intention of letting me go down on him at that point, but he was committed to letting me *think* that I could. I was willing to gamble that a man could excite Nick only with constant fondling, until he passed his threshold of revulsion. After that, Nick would rationalize the act to his mind's satisfaction.

"Should be a spot up ahead. I normally only go for girls, but I guess I'm a little horny," he said tightly. "Besides, I owe you after you knocked off Cosie for me."

As he reached partial erection, I sat back up and continued fondling his leg and crotch. I was reaching him quite well; his guard was lowering more and more. As he drove and I fondled, I babbled on and on about Mario and what we would do with the money. Soon, his nervousness disappeared; he seemed quite confident with a smug smile.

All this and a blow job, too. I almost laughed, wondering who was really in the driver's seat.

Incredibly, there *was* a secluded spot in that part of northern New Jersey. Nick drove down a maze of gravel and dirt roads until we came to where the landfill effort met the Secaucus marsh lands. I figured he must have made this trip before for equally macabre reasons. Of course, it was the spot he'd been heading for in the first place.

Soon we were parked in a valley surrounded by huge mounds of garbage. The sun began to set, and a ray reflected off a piece of a pop bottle, causing me to squint and think about things to do with bottles and gasoline.

Nick looked carefully in every direction, and I wondered what would upset him more, getting caught being blown by a man or getting caught killing someone. It was a terribly funny thought, and I suppressed the urge to laugh. Likewise fighting an urge, I was sure, to quickly shoot me, he slowly unzipped his trousers and pulled the hardened, wrist-like organ out. His eyes betrayed revulsion, excitement, impatience and something else: confusion. As he dipped with both hands into his crotch and pulled out two heavy testicles, he was plotting ahead, I was sure, trying to overcome the opportune distraction I had caused. He was the rapist who was taken aback when he realized that his victim was fucking *him*.

"Jeez, I wish you were a broad," he said, still scanning the area.

"Use your imagination," I suggested as I went down on him.

I abruptly felt excited and loathed myself for it. His cock was monstrous and smooth. It gave off a clean, male smell, which I normally would have found irresistible. Glancing up at his closed eyes, I could sense that my murder had become secondary. I guessed that his mind was sifting through memories of the exciting women in his life, searching for the finest to superimpose on me. I breathed deeply and let his cock glide down my throat, then I heard him moan and press back against the head rest. His body stiffened and trembled, then shuddered. He cried out as he came prematurely; wheezy groans came from his throat as the throbs waned and his huge penis became flaccid, lying silent inside my mouth.

I felt his groin tense and saw the shadow of his hand as it slowly reached for the pistol. Urgently, I grabbed the pistol's handle, blocking his hand. My teeth clamped down, and I reached with my other hand for my knife. His fist pummelled my head, then I felt his other hand slip underneath mine to grab the pistol. He cried out as my teeth broke his skin, and I felt—more than heard—the concussion of pistol fire, shattering the windshield. The car door opened and we were outside the car, rolling, rolling down into putrid mud, and he was pounding me again and again until I realized that the pistol had left his hand.

I released my bite and watched him turn pale as he looked down at his mangled penis. Again he screamed, then heaved and vomited as he frantically searched for the pistol. Spotting it near the car, he gasped and crawled toward it. Just before he reached it, I kicked it into the ravine and stood over him, threatening him with the knife. My head was bleeding; blood had trickled into my left eye, temporarily blinding it. Gasping for breath, I stared at him with one good eye and knew that he was in partial shock.

"What happened to Mario?" I gasped with an alien, trembling voice.

He blinked and opened his mouth, but couldn't speak.

I shook fiercely and could barely hold the knife. "Was this all planned? Is Mario dead or was he in on it?"

He opened his mouth again and groaned, then coughed. "Bleeding," was all he was able to say. "Hospital . . . I'm bleeding to death!"

"Answer me!" I demanded.

The wounded bear in him surged; his eyes took on a savage glint. "COCKSUCKERRRRR!" he screamed, coming for me with huge, clenched fists.

As he swung wildly at me, I slashed his knuckles and scrambled away from him.

"Oh, my God!" he wailed, staring into the deep gash across his fingers. He became immobile.

"Please, Nick!" I cried. "What happened to Mario? Tell me and I'll get you to a hospital, I promise! I can stop your bleeding!"

He pressed his bleeding hand against his bleeding penis and rocked back and forth in pain.

"Please, Nick," I pleaded.

He stared at me in disbelief as I dropped to my knees and sobbed. Then a rivulet of blood slipped into my right eye, prompting me to swiftly back away from him. As I urgently wiped my shirt sleeve over the eye to clear the blood, I heard an approaching scurrying sound and lashed out in panic with the knife. It sank into something soft, then I heard the terrifying sounds of a man drowning in his own blood.

I sat with my back turned to his sightless, glazed eyes and wept until the sun set and darkness closed in around me.

Solipsist. Alone in the universe.

I heard the distant sound of an approaching vehicle. A faint illumination crept over a distant hill, and I realized that in order to burn the car with me inside, Nick would have needed a way back to New York. The accomplice. The mysterious Oriental man. *That* was the person Nick had called from my apartment . . . not Mario.

Wearily, I searched Nick's pockets and found a cigarette lighter. Hearing the fast approaching car, I swiftly reached into the Chevrolet and grabbed a can of gasoline, running to the top of the nearest garbage mound. Finding a plastic bottle, I filled it with gasoline, then tore a portion of my shirt, stuffing it into the opening.

Headlights appeared; I lay on my stomach, cringing, as rancid odors assailed my nose.

A dark blue sedan with familiar plates pulled up behind the battered car, and the equally familiar Asian got out, obviously stunned by the sight of Nick's headlight-illuminated body. He rushed back inside the car to shut off the motor and turn off the headlights. A beam from a powerful flashlight began to scan the mound tops, forcing me to press my face into the garbage.

And then it made sense. Nick was the consummate opportunist and a brilliant plotter. Force little brother to do the impossible, then kill him. Trick the young Amerasian to do his job, then kill him, too. But Nick wanted to carry it a step further. He had obviously "sold" my body to another Oriental who probably wanted to fake his death and disappear. Same size as me. Perhaps a little older, but what the hell. Everyone goes; Nick would have been the victor. Neat as a pin.

Hearing the car door open and close, I peered down. My "body double" was searching through Nick's pockets. Apparently not finding what he was looking for, he shined the light into the old car and grabbed the car keys. Scampering to the trunk, he opened it, placing the flashlight underneath his arm. He opened up the small suitcase I had carried to Provincetown and sifted through it, inspecting the envelopes and single bottle of morphine, stuffing them inside his pocket.

Something odd appeared to be in the trunk, and I slowly rose to get a better look.

The man lifted out what appeared to be a kilo or so of white substance wrapped in plastic, then scanned the area with the flashlight again. Quickly, he ran to the sedan.

As the car started and the lights came on, illuminating the back of the older car, I stretched to better see what was inside the trunk. It appeared to be the strewn contents of my bag . . . or was it something else? Something seemed to snap inside me and I could suddenly see much better. A body lay face down inside the trunk. It had a huge section missing from its head.

"MARIOOOOOOOOOOOO!" I wailed.

The head moved and I could see Mario's ghostly face staring straight at me with silver eyes, between which was a gaping hole. He seemed to float out of the trunk and stood there waving at me with a ghoulish grin.

I felt bullets whizzing by me, followed by a sharp sting in my toe as a bullet glanced off my shoe. I realized that the man had heard me and was shooting at me. Dreamily, I lit the saturated cloth fuse with Nick's lighter and sent the bottle into a slow, lazy arc. It landed on the windshield of the sedan, exploding with a ferocity which sent the accomplice into flaming cartwheels down the ravine.

The love of my life stood there, engulfed in flames, then disappeared as the fire began to devour the older car and Nick's body as well. I staggered down the mound and tried to get a view of the inside of the trunk, but the flames and intense heat drove me away.

Several yards away, I turned and waited for the explosions of the second gasoline can and the fuel tanks of both cars. As they ignited, one by one, the fire became like an incendiary iris, magnifying within a great demon eye, glaring at me, enraged.

I felt myself slipping into something I could only speculate as being another dimension as I circled the fire like a stalking cat. Memories of other moments merged with my field of vision, and I could see two funeral pyres. And as that image faded, it was replaced by a form identical to mine, dancing and laughing with Mario inside the inferno. I could hear wild samba music, then heard a rumbling in the distance, growing until it became deafening. It was the white orangutan coming for me, I knew, to lift me upon his huge shoulder and whisk me along a lunar-lit jungle path and up into the trees. But the sounds and smell of the beast diminished and died, leaving me in a valley of garbage, staring into a montage of fire and vivid dreams.

The wail of a siren came, and I turned and ran as hard as I could until I was outside the garbage dump and alongside a railroad track. For hours, I walked along the tracks until I arrived at a train station in Hoboken.

Walking through the train station, I felt myself slip again and became oblivious to all the stares from those late evening commuters who could either glimpse into the madness of my battered eyes or could smell the stench from my torn clothing. Soon, I found the connecting PATH entrance and caught a subway for Manhattan.

FIFTEEN

Tuesday Morning, August 20th

The alarm clock went off, and I awakened in my bed. I had no memory of how I got there from the PATH station, nor did I remember showering the stench and blood from my body. The reality of past events almost surfaced in my mind, but I suppressed it, even absurdly pretending that it had all been a bad dream. *Maybe I was mugged again*, I considered.

I made some coffee, and while sipping a cup, I was thinking about the status of my magazine. Again, the horror of the previous few days neared surfacing in my mind, but I kept it at bay with thoughts of Big Bitch, Denise and Tony. Thinking my friend might now be out on bail, I reached for the kitchen phone and called Tony's number . . . only to find it disconnected.

Ignoring the black eye, scabs and swollen bruises, I shaved, brushed my teeth, then showered again. Dressing for work in a light-weight suit, I left the apartment.

When I reached the subway entrance, I stopped, unable to enter. It had become the gaping hole of some leviathan's mouth. Saliva-dripping teeth ringed the entrance, waiting for me. And then it all came back to me: Cosotro, Nick . . . Mario's flaming corpse.

I rushed back to my apartment. Everyday things began to modify. Colors began to alter. Sounds were different. Familiar objects became alien. Somehow I knew that my sanity was in peril. I quickly wrote Denise a letter before it was too late.

Dear Denise,

Did you ever just sit and wonder—really wonder—about what would happen upon dying? And did you just let yourself go and let yourself get sucked into that forbidden vortex, never fearing or even caring if you'd make it back. Had it been black, alien nothingness, I suppose I'd have clawed back immediately and vowed to live my one life to the fullest. But I found myself joining the winds, drifting freely as particles of a temporarily fragmented, yet never completely dispersed, soul. I became a cloud. I joined the streams and found myself cascading down (up?) infinite tiers of understanding. I became one with the universe. Then I fell like snow upon this moonlit valley and formed again; saw a little faun performing a night sonata on pan pipes while perched upon the perimeter of a dream. The sound compelled silence from all but the wind,

which provided accompanying pedal tones and faint arpeggios. Moonbeams gave the surrounding forest a luminescence while nocturnal moisture clung to one soft, green path. Dulcet pipes bade me welcome to this verdant hippodrome. Then I saw his huge, white form ascend from the path's end and approached him, finally burying my face in his hot, glistening chest. And we waltzed through lushness until the passion rose powerfully between us, urging us to lay and mutually feast as sparkling animal eyes circled in witness. Dawn came, phasing the little faun and the creatures to permanight, sending an idyllic dream scurrying off to my memory banks, transmigrating my phantom love-beast to other horizons. Then, oddly, dawn never completed. For me, twilight never resolved. It left me adrift within the confines of a half-way zone. It left me alone with the lingering, sweet taste of his discarnate semen, frozen forever upon my tongue. And that is why I am writing you. If it is convenient, perhaps you would be so kind as to rescue me from this dimension.

Love, Pring.

When the letter was complete, I read it, unable to decipher its meaning completely. Sealing and stamping the envelope, I rushed for the mail drop next to a newsstand on Christopher Street. Walking past the newspapers on display, I read the headlines:

MOB WAR ESCALATES

There were sub-headings:

DEATH OF ARMANDO COSOTRO RULED MURDER

and

DEATH TOLL NOW FEARED AT 8 WITH DISCOVERY OF 2 UNIDENTIFIED, CHARRED BODIES IN SECAUCUS

Oscar Pring Davidson, a gentle Amerasian, caused the death of seven men and one exquisite, white orangutan.

Slipping further . . . better hurry, better hurry, better hurry.

I pushed the letter through the opening and watched as it fell into the darkness of the bin.

And that was when my sanity took refuge somewhere else.

SIXTEEN

August 20th through November 26, 1968

I remember a succession of vague dreams and myriad hushed voices. I sensed a multitude of animals, sniffing at my prostrate form. I remember either huddling in a single bed inside a large ward or sitting in a chair, staring out a window. Without any concept of time, I watched as the green leaves of a lone courtyard tree slowly turned to pale yellow, then amber. And then the leaves were gone; one morning I looked out and saw that the limbs were covered with thick snow. I remember a gentle black man dressed in white who escorted me to a cafeteria, where he would coax me into feeding myself. Having helped me master that, he taught me how to use the commode and the shower. Looking back over it, I think I made those meager improvements just to please him. But it was as far as I could go under the circumstances.

I remember sitting in an office filled with books and staring at a man across from me. I listened carefully, but couldn't understand a word he—or anyone else— said. It was as if they were speaking to me in Mandarin or Urdu, and I just had no desire or reason to do anything but remain unresponsive. It never occurred to me that I was psychotic, and I never thought of why I was there—never wondered who I was. I felt at peace there.

All along, I had the white room dreams, but none of them made any sense to me. During one, an entire wall had opened, and I found myself walking upon the surface of Saturn, which turned out to be a living creature. Ultra-low bass tones emanated from the ground, sending a warm, erotic vibration through me. A glint of bright color from the top of a pyramid caught my eye and I stared at it, astonished that it didn't consist of any of the primary colors found on earth. I remember being stupefied that my brain hadn't shorted out trying to process the indescribable, alien hue.

Then, as the days began to shorten and the rains became cold and dreary, the dreams turned more vivid—more urgent.

I sat at the console, not knowing exactly how long I had. The display screen was blank, and I pressed a button labeled, SANCTI. My own image appeared; I could see the reflection of a windmill in my eyes, could hear the sounds of hot, dusty afternoons in a southwestern desert. My lips were parched, and my skin was badly sunburned. My lips parted and a strange voice murmured, "In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti."

The image disappeared and was replaced by a vision of several male nurses and orderlies scurrying toward me. Then they were just hanging there, frozen in flight.

. . . and, darkness.

The pinging sound of a hammer striking a nail reverberated.

"Thorazine here! Give me a hundred with a backup hundred!"

"In nomine patris . . . ."

I saw myself behind the console, looking indifferently up at another image of myself. Storm clouds rumbled above me, and I began to hear wailing below. Looking down, I could see my blood rushing down a wooden pole, could see a Roman soldier taking aim with his spear.

"Lemme go, lemme go, you motherfuckers! I'm Pontius Pilate! Can't you see his halo? He must be crucified!"

The echo of a voice from the past: "It's like a halo, an annular eclipse. Your head eclipses Saturn, and I am in the umbra . . . umbra . . . umbra . . . ."

"Morphine here!"

"Hold him down, goddammit. Hold him down!"

"MARIOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The console and screen disappeared, and I found myself sitting nude under a baking sun, staring up at the windmill. The rhythmic clattering of the windmill was hypnotic.

Mario appeared at the base of the windmill, also nude. I stood up and walked toward him, but he backed away, laughing. I followed, but he began to run. The wind picked up; clouds of dust swirled around us. Soon the wind was fierce; the howling was deafening, then Mario disappeared. I continued running until I came to a huge rock. I could vaguely see Mario's silhouette atop the rock, but I couldn't find a way up its sharp incline. Frantically, I circled the rock, looking for a way up. The wind became even more violent and pressed me against the face of the rock, squeezing my breath away. And then I found

myself lying in a fetal position, half covered with sand. The wind had stopped and there was an eerie silence. I lifted my gaze to the top of the rock and saw Mario nailed to a cross in crucifixion. Thousands of flies were congregating at the gaping hole in his head.

The image disintegrated, and I found myself on my back, moving fast. I was calm, yet could feel muted pain from somewhere on my body. Ceiling lights raced by above me.

"Doctor Phelps to O.R."

A face appeared above me, slightly out of focus. I recognized a surgical cap and mask, then I began to drift into oblivion.

As I came out of what I assumed was anesthesia, I could hear two nurses talking, and I actually understood what they were saying. Somehow, I knew that I was on the verge of getting my sanity back.

"How did he get the hammer and nails?"

"No one knows. It's so weird, even for here. The security must not be too good down there."

"How did he get this one to just stand there while he nailed his hand to the goddamn wall?"

"Deep depression, almost catatonic. Totally passive. Can't feel pain. I used to work in psychiatric."

"Oh, that's right . . . . Hey."

"What?"

"He's coming out. Look at his eyes."

"Better call for an orderly in case he's violent."

"I'm a gentle Amerasian. I haven't a violent bone in my body," I slurred, scaring the hell out of them.

My right hand had been impaled and there were additional bruises about my face and shoulders. The most painful wound was the tear in my left abdomen, which was inflicted by the claw of my attacker's hammer. Apparently, one of my fellow patients had decided that I was Jesus and he was Pontius Pilate. Of course, no one ever found out how he got the hammer.

After healing satisfactorily, I was told that I would be transferred back to the ward I had silently lived in for almost three months. An orderly arrived to accompany me, but it wasn't my black friend. Instead it was a wiry, tattooed white man with emotionless eyes. It was then that I realized that I would have to be very careful. I would have to project sanity at all times. Somehow, I had to get out of that awful place before it digested me.

The orderly led me through a set of heavy, steel doors, beyond which was a hallway with private rooms off to each side. The rooms to my left seemed like offices, with open doors and a desk and two chairs in each. The rooms to my right had closed doors with one-foot-square, steel mesh windows. Glimpsing inside one I could see that the walls were padded. Ahead was a nursing station, adjacent to a steel mesh barrier. Beyond that was the main ward with beds lining each wall.

As I reached a doorway embedded in the barrier, the orderly began fumbling through his keys. Several of the all-male patients looked up and stared at me.

"No, Simpson," I heard a female say behind us at the nursing station. "He goes to Doctor Mathews first."

I stared inside the strangely familiar ward, petrified by all the eyes on me.

"Hey," said the orderly, getting my attention.

I turned and followed him the way we had come. We passed through a maze of corridors until we arrived at a much more cheerfully decorated section of the hospital, which I figured to be Bellevue. The orderly opened an office door and nodded for me to go inside.

I sat in a chair opposite a desk, behind which sat a man dressed in a white smock. Somehow I knew that I'd been there before. His back was to me and he was speaking softly into a telephone. I was terrified of the possibility of saying the wrong things and had no idea what I had said previously. It occurred to me that maybe the man sitting at the desk was a cop and not a psychiatrist.

As he hung up, he turned around and studied me with clear, light-blue eyes. He had a round, kind face and a receded hairline with a salt and pepper fringe. He smiled disarmingly, complete with two dimples. "I understand you can talk now."

I understood him and opened my mouth to reply in the most casual way that there was nothing wrong with me. But nothing came out. All I could do was stare at him.

He seemed patient and understanding. I'm sure that I wasn't the only one of his patients unable to talk. "Awful world out there, isn't it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I don't know what someone did to you outside, but perhaps it might be good for you to discuss it. I'm here to help you." He paused, then added, "I want you to think of me as your friend."

"Mario," I said, pleased that I had said something.

The psychiatrist was also pleased. "Mario? Is that your name?"

I shook my head in frustration. I wondered which area of my brain needed stimulation in order to talk. *Oh, my God! Do I have brain damage? Was I hit by a car?*

"Then who is Mario?"

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes in complete concentration. I became a miniaturized probe, riding atop a red blood cell, looking for the damage in my brain. "They . . . killed . . . killed him."

The psychiatrist's eyes widened.

I became excited, but instinctively knew that excitement would be counter-productive. Again I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "My name is . . . is . . . Pring."

The doctor smiled and leaned back in his seat. "It's such a beautiful name. I'll bet you're part Asian. Chinese?" He studied me. "Vietnamese? Thai?"

I nodded excitedly.

"Thai," he said with satisfaction. He turned and looked out the window at a courtyard below. "Pring?" He slowly turned to me, smiling warmly. "Do you speak English?"

I nodded.

"Do you like staying here?"

I frowned and shook my head vigorously.

"Then you've got to take it easy and relax." He stood up and walked around to the front of his desk, sitting upon it. He held my undamaged hand and patted it. "You're going to have to learn to trust me and place yourself into my hands." He released my hand and massaged my shoulder. "I'm going to lead you out of this maze, Pring. Just let me help you."

I began to weep with joy. I imagined him pulling me from the quagmire, from the "dimension" I had been trapped inside. I knew then that I was half out and had the help of a caring man who was about to help me escape its pull. "Thank you, doctor," I managed to say.

He turned and pushed a button on the other side of his desk. I knew that I would have to go back to the ward.

"I'm . . . I'm . . . " I struggled, standing up.

"Just relax. Pretend to wipe away the tension from your throat," he urged, approaching me.

I made a wiping motion across my throat and smiled, causing him to smile, too. "I'm going to . . . try . . . harder."

And then he embraced me, releasing me as the orderly arrived to escort me back to the ward.

"We'll talk tomorrow, Pring."

I waved at him like a child as I was led away.

SEVENTEEN

Monday, December 2nd

I sat on my bed inside the ward, looking warily at the patients around me. For the first time, I knew that I didn't belong there any more. I felt afraid of the other patients. There was a young man who would carefully walk along an imaginary line on the floor, shooting imaginary "six-guns" at imaginary foes. A group of old-timers would have their usual card game in the center of the ward, and invariably it would end in a childish argument over the rules for some exotic game I never heard of. There was a man who slept most of the time in the bed next to mine. Someone said that he'd had shock therapy. Others said that they had performed a lobotomy on him.

Two beefy orderlies brought through the first of several padded cell patients. Every morning around ten, they would bring in those more disturbed patients one at a time so they could shower and shave with special razors that had the blades locked in. We all had to use them, actually. The first patient that morning was a young, muscular Filipino who had a smile frozen on his face. Of course, I'd wanted to talk to him earlier and get to know him, but one of the nurses warned me never to look him in the eye. Those unsuspecting patients who did so became the innocent victims of violent surprise attacks. So as he walked by with the orderlies holding on to each arm, I looked away.

I watched as an orderly I got to know as Mike walked into the nursing station. He seemed to like me and told me about all the goings-on in the world outside: the Democratic Convention riots in late August, President Johnson's decision to stop bombing North Vietnam, and Nixon's winning the presidency. He motioned for me to approach the mesh security door, and my spirits suddenly surged. It meant that Dr. Mathews was back, after having been away for several days. All I'd been able to determine was that his wife had been ill.

Mike opened the door and nodded. "Dr. Mathews wants to see you."

"How is his wife?"

Mike looked at me with a surprised expression, then smiled. "I understand that she'll be fine. You must be doing much better." He studied me as he unlocked the mesh door and let me through. We walked abreast down the corridor. "You look more relaxed and confident."

"You think so?" His observation made me feel good about myself. Over the past several days, I had begun thinking more rationally. The grieving process for Mario had ascended to another, less-painful level. "You think Doctor Mathews will think so?"

He hesitated. "It isn't my job to make any kind of prognosis . . . but, yeah, I think he will."

Reaching Dr. Mathews' office, Mike knocked then opened the door. Dr. Mathews was on the telephone and had his back to me. The orderly nodded at a chair and I sat down. He squeezed my shoulder, then left.

A short time later, Dr. Mathews hung up and stared briefly at the wall.

"You wanted to see me?" I said, interrupting his thoughts. "I understand your wife is doing well. I'm glad."

He turned and smiled, surprised. "Why, thank you, Pring." Surprisingly, he moved to the chair next to me and placed his feet atop his desk. "I've been hearing some really good things about you."

"That's good."

He glanced out the window. "When you first arrived, we determined that you'd taken a great quantity of drugs. You had amphetamines, traces of morphine and some LSD in your bloodstream. Basically, what happened was that you had a severe anxiety reaction—probably exacerbated by the drugs. Then you fell into a deep depression." He sighed. "We didn't do a very good job. At first, we figured that you had a genetic predisposition to what we call 'endogenous' depression—caused from within, you might say. Depression with people like that can be triggered by certain drugs, but we couldn't find any traces of those particular ones in your system. We put you on amitriptyline, but you started hallucinating . . . and once we thought you were converting to mania."

"Like a manic-depressive," I added, listening intently.

He seemed to be pleased with my increased rationality. "Yeah. Then we realized that your depression was 'exogenous.' In other words, we became convinced that you were reacting to something terrible that had happened to you. We didn't consider that at first, because your reaction was so severe, but I decided to change your treatment after the hallucinations. I tried a new drug called 'trazodone,' and that seemed to work a little bit. Then, when old 'Pontius Pilate' decided to nail you to the wall, you seemed to come out of it more. It was then time to do a little psychotherapy." He smiled.

"Am I still on tra . . . zo—"

"No, we have you on a mild tranquilizer now." He got up and went back to his chair behind the desk.

"Do you think I might relapse?" I tempered my elation with a little pessimism.

"It depends." He took out a notebook. "Do you know what it was that triggered your reaction?"

I nodded, but was terrified at having to relive everything again. But I knew that I would have to in order to get discharged. I even had second thoughts about *wanting* to get discharged.

"First off, why don't you give me some vital statistics, okay?"

I stared at his large hands and realized that I was becoming infatuated with him. "Okay."

"What's your full name, Pring?"

It finally dawned on me that he was asking a question. "Oh . . . uhh . . . Oscar Davidson."

He wrote it down. "Age?"

I chuckled nervously. "Well, if this is still nineteen sixty-eight, I'm twenty-seven. If it's after November eleventh, then I'm twenty-eight. There're no calendars in the ward."

"Twenty-eight, then. Born November eleventh . . . uhh . . ."

"Nineteen forty."

"Ah, Scorpio." He made eye contact as if to verify that I was indeed a Scorpio.

"Not a typical one at all," I assured, looking away as most Scorpios wouldn't.

"Place of birth?"

"Bangkok, Thailand."

"Eurasian?"

"Amerasian. My father was American."

"Do you know how you got here?"

"No."

"Did you receive any bad news prior to being brought here? Anything traumatic?"

I sighed and concentrated, knowing it had to be good and convincing. "I got word that my lover had been killed . . . . It must have hit me pretty hard, I guess." I shuddered. "Very hard."

He stared at me thoughtfully, and I figured that there was more to it. "What did I say when I was first brought in?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Nothing. You wouldn't say a word. How did your girl friend die?"

"It was a he . . . and he was killed in an auto accident in Maine," I said, wondering why I admitted to being gay. A paranoid flash entered my mind, and I saw myself being cerebrally altered and used as a gay CIA operative.

This guy's a sucking machine. Just turn him loose in East Germany . . . .

"Was his name Mario?"

I became alert. "I thought you said that I'd said nothing."

"The last time we talked you said, 'Mario,' then you said, 'They killed him.'"

A feeling of panic began to overcome me as I realized that perhaps they were going to turn me over to the police. I knew that I had to find out more. "Who brought me here?"

"The police."

My heart began to race.

"You were running down Christopher Street, screaming. After they got you here, you went into a deep state of depression and didn't say a word until you were assaulted in the television room. We didn't know who you were, of course, because you had no identification and no fingerprints on file."

I shook my head forlornly. "Jesus," I whispered.

"Do you have any friends in New York? Family?"

Then I thought of Denise. "Oh, my God. She probably thinks I'm dead."

"You want to call her from here?"

I hesitated, knowing that Denise would want the details. "I'll call later."

"Pring, there are no phones available to you in that ward. You can trust me."

I nodded slowly, then watched as he handed me the telephone. I dialed.

I reached The *New York Globe* and asked for her extension. I became nervous as the doctor studied me. It was as if he could look through the veneer and see that I had committed unspeakable acts, like slicing throats and poisoning sadists and sucking my father's cock, not to mention starting a Mafia war.

"Trapmann," Denise blurted in her typical impatient fashion.

"De . . ." I froze.

"Hello?"

I cleared my throat.

"Who is this?"

"Denise?"

"Yeah! Who is this?"

"Denise . . . . It's me, Pring."

Silence. Deafening silence.

"Denise?" I glanced at the doctor helplessly.

"Where the fuck *are* you? I thought you were dead. You have any idea how much I've gone through trying to find you? Where in the hell are you?"

"I'll tell you if you if you'll just cool it for a minute," I said, chuckling.

"Talk, damn it."

"I'm at Bellevue."

"I checked at Bellevue! I checked with every goddamn hospital in New York!"

I cringed. "Bellevue *Psychiatric*, Denise. I had no identification. I was a John Doe."

"Oh, my God," she gasped. "That letter. I should have known by the letter."

"I guess I went zonkers. But I'm much better now . . . " I winked at the doctor. " . . . thanks to a religious experience."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"When are they discharging you?"

I glanced nervously at the doctor. "They haven't said. I don't know."

"I'll be right there to get you out," she said, abruptly hanging up.

EIGHTEEN

Tuesday Morning, December 3rd

Denise kept her promise. She did get me out, thanks to an overcrowding problem at the hospital and some smooth flirting with Dr. Mathews.

She had taken the day off from work, and we spent the entire morning in her apartment talking over coffee. She told me how she had used an apartment key I had given her years ago and found my wallet—how she had filed a missing persons report with the police and placed all my belongings into storage before my landlord had me evicted.

Reluctantly, I told her the entire story, leaving nothing out. Judging from her variety of expressions it became obvious that she was vacillating between believing me and passing the whole thing off as one big drug-induced hallucination. Finally, as I got to the part about writing her the letter, I realized that she had become traumatized. I could see in her eyes that she could never look at me the same way again. In her mind, I was no longer the innocent, sweet, passive friend. It made no difference whether she believed me or not. To her, I was either completely wacko or a savage killer—perhaps a little of both.

I tried to reach her, to know her thoughts, but she fell silent. "Just give me a while to digest all this, okay?" she said.

"I shouldn't have burdened you with all this, but there was no one else," I said. "It's not something I would tell Tony . . . "

"Tony's dead," she said softly.

I shook my head, not wanting to believe her.

"He was killed in his cell," she almost whispered. "And now I know why." She looked at me with fear and perhaps a little bit of loathing. "Nick Soleriani probably had it done, not knowing what you'd told Tony. I was almost run down by a car the day before Tony was killed."

. . . TWO UNIDENTIFIED, CHARRED BODIES IN SECAUCUS . . .

It was only a flash, but it staggered me, and I wondered if I was losing my sanity again. Deep inside, I grieved and felt immense guilt for Tony, but a powerful, more urgent anxiety seemed to pull at me. I wanted to weep for my friend, but I didn't dare lose my composure. "Nick's dead. You're safe now," I

said.

. . . TWO . . . UNIDENTIFIED . . .

"Pring?"

Suddenly, I was again atop the mound of garbage, staring down into the trunk of the Chevrolet.

Two headlights.

. . . TWO UNIDENTIFIED, CHARRED BODIES . . .

"Nick, the Asian . . . one, *two*," I mumbled.

Denise began to cry. "Pring, you have to go back. You're not through it, yet."

"Mario's *alive*, Denise," I whispered.

"What?"

"There were only *two* unidentified, charred bodies found in Secaucus. Not *three*! The image of Mario was a hallucination."

I could detect a growing anxiety in her expression, and her eyes seemed to avoid mine. "He's dead." She said it softly, matter-of-factly.

"No, Denise." I smiled, wondering why she was so emphatic. Then it occurred to me that perhaps she knew something concrete. "Wait a minute. What do you know? What are you holding back?"

"When I went to your apartment, I saw an extra-large shirt on the floor. I assumed it was Mario's. I took it to this psychic, Reba . . . . She does work for the police sometimes. One of the best. She confirmed what I was feeling, that Mario had been shot and buried at a construction sight. He's part of some new office building foundation."

A touch of callousness? I wondered. I couldn't believe it. Her comments came across as too spontaneous, too *reaching*. Denise was never that cruel.

"I gave her some of your clothing," she continued, "and she confirmed my feelings on that, too. She said that you were alive but hiding somewhere."

Then I thought about something Nick had said about not being able to kill his own flesh and blood—about the promise he'd made to his mother about raising Mario. "Then both of you are wrong about Mario. My gut says he's alive."

She stared at me with a blank expression, and I realized that I had to get out of her life. I had to find Mario. "Denise, I'm going to go away for awhile. Where is my wallet?"

Confused, she got up and walked toward her bedroom, then stopped. The ambivalence in her was obvious.

"Denise, this isn't the end. I'll be back after you've had the chance to sort everything out."

She continued into her bedroom, returning with my wallet, which she handed me.

I opened it and pulled out a laminated card next to my drivers license. The card contained a series of six numbers with no other marks of identification. "Denise, I come from a much wealthier family than I led you to believe. Before my parents died, they set up trust funds for me. The insurance was staggering."

She shook her head, then stared at the card.

"It was so much that I gave my parent's tin brokerage business to my mother's family. My father had no family."

She looked up at me and blinked, child-like.

"I have funds in Switzerland, the Bahamas and good old Chase Manhattan. I have no idea how much I'm worth. I never thought much about it, because there was nothing I really wanted that money could buy me. Call it a quasi vow of poverty, but all I ever wanted was someone like Mario, and I didn't want to be tempted to try to *buy* a man like him. That never works. I wanted to get him fair and square. I never offered you or Tony anything because I felt that it would be buying your friendship. Oh, I'd have been there if you'd needed money, but neither of you ever did." I stood up, placed the card back inside my wallet, and walked to the apartment door.

She followed me with blank eyes and an open mouth, and I felt very guilty. I felt terrible for not grieving more for Tony. I felt horrible for having dumped so much on Denise.

I held my hand on the doorknob. "Rest assured I will more than make all this up to you, Denise." I opened the door and left.

NINETEEN

December 20th, Amagansett, Long Island

I stood in the picture window looking through a powerful telescope at Cosotro's beach house less than a block away. A light snow was falling and the sky was overcast, but I felt lucky for a change. There was a cozy fire in the fireplace and the refrigerator was stocked with plenty of food. As expected, the two young men were still there, having been a part of Cosotro's fringe life, not his basic Mafia existence.

My good fortune started when I drove through the area in a rental car and found a harried older man struggling to winterize his cottage. He'd been more than eager to rent it to me for the winter at a thousand dollars a month—all in advance, with no references or I.D. required.

It was obvious that Mario had been right: Cosotro had most certainly lived a double life unknown not only to his wife and family in Queens, but the mob as well. And when the police had found Cosotro dead, he was lying in an alley near Wall Street. The secret bodyguards, Scarface and Wolf Eyes, weren't that stupid, apparently. Consequently, the beach house, the limousine and the bodyguards remained a secret and were left untouched throughout the gang warfare I triggered. It stood to reason that the two young bodyguards would stay on at the cottage as long as they could. But which one had known Nick? How well? Well enough to know where Mario was? It was a long shot, but it was my only option.

For four days, I'd watched the house and determined that the two men were living under primitive conditions. They'd apparently fallen on bad times. The utility bills had most certainly not been paid, because the house was mostly dark at night with continuous smoke rising from the fireplace chimney. The limousine sat unused under a car port, but there was a motorcycle that the men took turns using. Having read about a rash of burglaries in Bridgehampton and Amagansett, I assumed that Scarface and his shorter friend were probably making ends meet by burglarizing houses in the neighborhood. I hoped that the local police didn't close in on them before I had my turn with them.

I watched as Scarface rode off on the motorcycle. I decided that there was no use in waiting any longer. Ramming a clip into a hot .45 I'd bought from one of Tony's more hard-core junky friends, I secured it inside a shoulder holster and bundled up with a hooded windbreaker. It was time for a little walk on the beach.

As I passed by the beach house, I tried to locate the shorter man out of the corner of my eye, but he was nowhere in sight. Reversing directions, I saw him digging with a shovel underneath the house. He was burying something—sewage and garbage, I reasoned, since the water had probably been

turned off. He glanced at me, paying me no mind, then walked up the stairway to the main entrance. The second he was out of sight, I ran to the house and stood underneath the stairway.

I listened intently and heard him walk around in the living room, then climb up the circular staircase to the loft bedroom. Carefully, I slipped up the stairway and gently turned the doorknob, relieved that it wasn't locked. Holding my breath, I sneaked inside and tiptoed to a spot out of sight of the loft.

There was a large fire in the fireplace, and the whole living room was comfortably warm. The place appeared to have been trashed, however, and there was a foul odor I could not immediately identify. I assumed that it was the combination odor of general body filth and rotting food.

As the young man descended the spiral staircase again, he was dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt. Confident that he wasn't wearing a pistol, I inched closer with the .45 extended. When he reached the bottom rung, I came from his blind side and pressed the barrel next to his temple. He abruptly stopped and his body stiffened.

"We meet again," I said.

He halfway turned his head and stared at me, confused.

I pulled the hood back, enabling him to recognize me.

"Oh, shit," he moaned.

"When will your friend be back?"

He glared menacingly.

I gestured with the pistol for him to sit in a dining room chair with his back to the front door. "Why don't we sit down and talk a bit, huh?"

He reluctantly moved in that direction but turned around defiantly.

"Don't test me, creep," I growled. "I've already been tested . . . and I passed."

He frowned and looked at me through squinted eyes. Ultimately deciding not to toy with me, he sat down as ordered.

"Now, answer all my questions, or I'll merely blow your brains out," I said simply. "Scarface seems to be the information man anyway. The boss, I'll bet. Does he give you orders?"

"No one gives me orders," he said, his voice low and fierce.

Again I saw the wolf-like expression in his eyes. "How come you guys didn't get involved in the gang war?"

He shrugged.

"You aren't in the family, are you, Wolf Man?"

He didn't answer, but sort of smiled at my name for him.

I pulled back the hammer and aimed the pistol at his nose.

"Not really," he said quickly, the smile gone.

"But I'll bet that Cosotro told you plenty, didn't he?"

He shrugged. "You could say that, I guess."

"Who do you think I work for?"

"No one can figure it out. Everybody's killing everybody else. Everyone's paranoid, man." He smiled, exposing some missing teeth. "Who *do* you work for?"

"I can't tell you that, because I'm going to let you live if you play ball with me, okay?"

He smiled again. "That's cool. What do you want to know?"

"What do you know about Nicky The Horse?"

He shrugged. "He was into Cosotro for lots of bread's all I know. Otherwise, he was part of the Tringili family, but he didn't get along too good with Cosotro, you know?"

"What about his brother, Mario?"

His expression was blank. "Mario?"

Right up against a blank wall, I thought.

"He wasn't into family business, except through Nicky. A marine. Fought in World War Two and Korea. You ever meet Nicky?"

"No."

I shook my head, wondering if my plan would work. "When does your friend get back?"

"I never know. He went to pawn some silverware and buy some food."

"Then we'll wait," I said, dreading the wait.

He squirmed uncomfortably, no doubt worried about Scarface's arrival and some sort of confrontation.

Over an hour of nerve-wracking waiting was shattered by the sound of the approaching motorcycle, and both of us stiffened. My heart began to pound.

"Jimmy is pretty hot-headed, man," Wolf Man briefed me excitedly. "He's not cool like I am. If you have to take him out, please, just let me go and you'll never see me again. Okay?"

"Is he armed?" I asked, hearing the motorcycle shut down.

"A thiry-eight in his belt."

"Okay, just sit still and you won't get hurt." My hand began to shake, and the young man noticed. I wondered if it would give him the courage to try to overpower me. I strained to remain calm.

Heavy footfalls came to the stairway outside. Quickly, I moved to the side of the entry way.

As the door opened, I aimed the pistol and watched as Jimmy, alias Scarface, walk into my sights.

"Whatcha doing just sitting there, asshole?" Jimmy said. "I told you to . . ."

I slammed the door shut behind him, causing him to stop suddenly.

"Don't try to be a hero, Jimmy," said Wolf Man, his back still to the entrance.

"Yeah, Jimmy," I said softly. "Just keep looking forward and hold that bag of groceries straight out in front of you."

Slowly, he extended the groceries, and I cautiously disarmed him, placing the .38 in my back pocket. "Now . . . set the groceries down on the kitchen counter and walk nice and easy to the dining room table."

Surprisingly, he did exactly as I directed, then turned to stare at me. It was an intimidating look, but I'd been conditioned enough not to let it get to me. "Sit down at the table with your friend."

He obeyed, whereupon I pulled up a chair at an angle to both of them in order to watch their hands and feet.

"You know who he is, don't you?" asked Wolf Man of Jimmy.

Jimmy shook his head and studied my face.

"He's the one who poisoned Cosotro, man."

Jimmy's face flushed, alarming me that he was about to go for me and take his chances. "You rotten cocksucker." His scar became crimson.

"Easy, Jimmy," urged the shorter man. "This ain't no queen here, man. He'll blow your fucking head off."

"Like I told your buddy, here, I'll leave you guys in one piece if you answer some questions for me, okay?"

Jimmy said nothing. Instead, he looked down at the table, his facial muscles rippling in anger.

I looked up at the loft, and the memory of my rape came back with a vengeance. I became impatient and angry. Reaching inside my pocket for the knife, I pulled it out and clicked it open. I strode to the table and placed the knife blade against Jimmy's neck. "You're about to get another scar, only this one won't heal."

Fear came to Jimmy's eyes for the first time, and he began to shake.

"Nicky The Horse has a brother by the name of Mario. Where is he?"

Jimmy frowned.

I cut him slightly with the knife. "Where is he? What do you know about him? Start saying something before I go crazy with this fucking knife!"

Jimmy raised his hands slightly in a calming gesture. "The marine, right?"

"Right." My heart began to skip an occasional beat.

"I saw him at Nicky's funeral."

"You're lying!" I yelled. "What would *you* be doing at the fucking funeral?!"

"I liked Nick."

I pulled back the knife. "What?"

"He knew about me working for Cosotro and the other shit, but he never told nobody. And I never saw any reason to tell Cosotro. Nick kept teasing me that he could pay me more than what Cosotro was paying me. He was always good to me."

I looked at Wolf Man's expression, which indicated that he had no idea the relationship had been going on. Of course, Nicky was trying to get to Jimmy, and he couldn't take the chance of trying to reach both of them.

"I went to the funeral out of respect. That, and my father works for the Tringilis. I stayed in the background," Jimmy said softly.

"Who else would know both Nicky and Mario. A cousin, a friend. Anybody," I asked impatiently.

"I don't know . . . maybe this guy, Bruno Sambucco. He lives across the street from where Nick lived."

"Where did Nick live?" I said it staccato. I was becoming wired, as if I had taken speed.

"In Flushing . . . near the park. I think on Gloria . . . yeah, Gloria and Evergreen. Two, three houses from Evergreen."

I pulled the knife away, somehow knowing that he wasn't lying.

"That's all I know, man." Jimmy slumped in the chair.

As I was about to step back, I felt a sharp punch to the side of my face and sensed that I was falling. Looking up, I saw Wolf Man twisting my wrist for the knife as Jimmy snatched away the .45. Frantically, I lunged for my pistol and heard it go off as my finger accidentally pushed the trigger.

Falling backwards, I caught a glimpse of Jimmy's eyes, which were trained on Wold Man. I reached for the .38 and pointed it at Jimmy, who was looking in horror at the gaping hole in the shorter man's ear. As if in slow motion, Jimmy turned the pistol toward me just as I began firing six rounds into his chest.

Strangely, I became numb and calm. I looked down at Jimmy, who was about as dead as anyone could be. His eyes and mouth were open. Wolf Man was moaning as a severed artery pumped blood out of his ear in abundant spurts. Pushing the .38 into my belt, I extracted the .45 out of Jimmy's tight grip and picked up my knife from the expanding pool of blood around Wolf Man's head. Taking a dish cloth from the kitchen, I walked to the entrance door and wiped my fingerprints from the door handle.

As I stood in the doorway, I looked back once more, scanning the room for any evidence I might have overlooked. Finding none, I looked at Wolf Man, who had stopped moving. "You had to go for me, didn't you? Had to be the tough guy."

Making sure that the hood was hiding my face, I walked down to the beach and ambled toward the rental cottage, carefully looking for anyone who might have been close enough to hear the shots. I looked for figures standing in open windows, people walking on the beach. There was no one around. Apparently, no one had heard or seen a thing.

That afternoon, I parked the rental car at the southeast corner of Evergreen and Gloria. It was a neat, typically Italian or German or Irish neighborhood—all white. I peered down Gloria to my left and studied the second and third houses from the northwest corner. There seemed to be activity at both houses, judging from the kids playing in both yards. Looking to my right from the northeast corner, I saw an elderly lady walking by a window in the second house and a man repairing a storm window on the third. Moving the car to the northeast corner, I studied the houses on the opposite side of Gloria, on either side of Evergreen, and found a "for sale" sign in front of the third house from the southeast corner. I logically assumed that the man fixing the storm window was Bruno Sambucco.

Having showered and changed into a suit, there was no evidence of the massacre I had performed just hours earlier. I felt no guilt, no shame. I was obsessed with finding Mario, and my focus was on that alone. I had to find out if he had deceived me. I was confident that I would know the minute my eyes met his, and I was prepared to kill him if he had. If he was innocent and truly loved me, then I was prepared to sweep him off his feet and leave New York and all the carnage behind forever.

I checked the clip in my .45 and pulled a spare clip out of the glove compartment, placing it inside my coat pocket. "Mr. Sambucco?" I practiced. "My name is Pring . . . . my name is . . . . Good afternoon, Mr. Sambucco . . . ." I got out of the car and walked toward the middle-aged man who was working on the storm window. I had no idea what to say or how to say it.

By the time I reached his walkway, he had already spotted me and was glaring at me suspiciously.

"Mr. Sambucco?" I mimicked my mother's Thai accent.

"Who wants to know?" he asked softly, looking me up and down. He squinted at the bruise on the side of my face.

"My name is Pring Soleriani." I let the name soak in.

He frowned and glanced at the house across the street, which essentially told me that I was at the right place. I followed his glance to the empty house. Turning back to him, I looked beyond him at what appeared to be a white Corvette in his half-opened garage.

"I am the son of Mario Soleriani. I come from Korea to find him. You help me find him, please?"

"Who the hell are you?" The older man inched toward the front door, terrified.

"I am his son . . . "

"He was as queer as a three dollar bill," he said softly. "Who the hell are you?"

A middle-aged woman came to the front door and smiled, obviously wondering what I was talking to the man about.

"I don't know any Soleriani," grumbled the man, apparently for her sake, turning his back.

I turned to the woman. "Please, madam. I am Pring

Soleriani, son of Mario Soleriani . . ."

"I said I didn't know any . . . "

"Bruno!" snapped the woman.

"Shut up!" yelled Bruno, his eyes blazing. He turned to me. "Get off my property."

I regarded both of them in turn and realized that I had only two options: do a magnificent acting job and play on the woman's sympathy . . . or force the information out of them at gunpoint. In which case I could possibly have to kill them, which would bring about a moral dilemma. Of all the people I'd killed, there had been no other alternative. It was either them or me.

Tears began to stream down my face involuntarily. It wasn't acting. I was emotionally devastated and knew that I couldn't live any semblance of a normal life not knowing the truth about Mario . . . nor could I ever forgive myself for taking the lives of two innocent people. "Please help me find him," I sobbed. "Please help me find Mario."

Bruno suddenly ran inside the house, mumbling that he was going to call the police. He walked to a telephone near a stairway and held his hand on it, looking back at me.

His wife stared at me sadly from behind the screen door, and I slowly approached her.

"You'd better leave," she said softly. "You have to understand that a lot of bad things have happened over there. My husband doesn't trust anyone any more."

"I know what happened. Please. I have to help my father. I must find him."

And just as I was about to rush inside, she began to tremble and opened her mouth. "A place called Herb's Alibi in Chicago," she said, almost in a whisper.

Bruno began to dial the police.

"Herb's Alibi in Chicago," I repeated. "God bless you." I turned and ran to the car.

As night fell, I was aboard a TWA flight bound for Chicago.

Herb's Alibi was a bar on Mannheim Road, across the street from the O'Hare Inn, so I decided to get a room there and clean up. Asking for a unit facing Mannheim Road, I was given a second floor double room overlooking the bar across the street.

I sat in the dark, contemplating my next move. It was twelve degrees with iced-over snow outside, and all I had was the same hooded windbreaker. As patrons began to arrive after the dinner hour, I realized that I would be conspicuous. All the people going in were dressed in heavy jackets and rubber boots. I imagined the sudden silence as I entered the bar with my windbreaker, loafers and slanted eyes. Unable to decide what to do, I could only sit there and contemplate how I would feel upon seeing him again and what his reaction might be.

I felt an urgent need to find out, so I pulled a sweater over a long-sleeve shirt then pulled on my shoulder holster with the .45. Slipping into the windbreaker, I walked out of the motel and crunched through the glazed snow to the curb across the street from the bar.

Still more people entered the bar, and I heard loud music. I recognized "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" by the Beetles. Even as I stood waiting for traffic to clear, others came, filling the bar even more. I had no idea what connection Mario had with the bar. *Did he own it, having paid for it with drug money? Would he be there? Did I hear the woman in Flushing wrong? Did she lie just to get rid of me?*

To the accompaniment of my chattering teeth and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," I scampered across the street and entered the dimly lit bar. I was assaulted by the loud music and an unbudging wall of people. The stench of stale cigarette smoke and beer was intense, and peanut shells were all over the floor. Struggling through the mass of people to within a couple of yards of the bar, I pushed down the length of it, looking over the three bartenders. Just inside the end of the bar sat a bearded Mario, flirting with two voluptuous female customers.

I felt dizzy as I watched him and wondered if my blood pressure had skyrocketed. He still looked as good as ever, and the beard made him look even more attractive. His hair was still short but a bit greyer; his arms looked even bigger than before.

Situating myself behind the women, I leaned against the wall and watched him from the shadows, ordering a Scotch from a waitress struggling through the mass of people. I thought of the .45 in my shoulder holster and wondered if I could really kill the both of us. I had made out a will leaving everything to Denise before I moved into the Amagansett cottage, so my affairs were in order. I thought of how helpless I'd felt when Nick had sent me off to kill Cosotro. I felt that way again: helpless, with no other options. There was no way I could keep on living without Mario, even if he wasn't the man I thought he was—the man I fell in love with. I don't know whether it was the effect of my mother's religion or the reality that I could kill so efficiently that led me to believe that I wasn't afraid to die.

As I watched Mario talk to the women and leave most of the heavy work to the other two men behind the bar, I soon figured that he was the owner. I saw in his eyes an unattractive arrogance—the same arrogance I'd noticed in Nick and Cosotro. I expected him to escort the women to some elegant restaurant and show them off as gangster groupies.

I stayed in the shadows for almost two hours, consuming three more drinks. The crowd had diminished to the point that there were vacancies on the bar stools. One of the women at the corner of the bar announced to a man across the way that they were leaving, so I expected Mario to leave with them. And as they put on their coats, Mario lifted up a hinged section of the bar and eased himself from a high stool to a wheel chair. He bade the women good-night and whisked past me toward the men's room. I stared down at where his legs should have been and saw nothing. His legs were missing. As he reached the men's room door, he glanced back at me with a curious expression and wheeled himself inside.

More people left and I walked to the corner where the women had been. One of the other bartenders came to wait on me.

"Yes, sir. What'll it be?" He looked up at the clock behind the bar. "Got plenty of time before last call."

"Scotch," I said, my voice almost cracking with emotion. I nodded toward the men's room. "I never saw a bartender without legs before."

"He's somethin' else," said the bartender. "Climbs all over the bar like an ape. He handles the service bar." He poured my drink. "Mario's a cousin of the owner from New York. Would you believe that his own brother did that to him?"

"Did what?"

"Hit him over the head and drug him across some railroad tracks. Tried to make it look like a suicide, I guess. Some brother, huh?"

I shuddered, spilling my drink as I tried to sip it. My mind was reeling, racing.

A door slammed behind me, and I heard the wheel-

chair speeding back toward the bar.

As he rolled into the pit and lowered the hinged section, he smiled at me, not really looking into my face.

"How're ya doin'?" he asked jovially, climbing up to the chair with powerful arms, taking me back to the fantasy with orangutan/Mario up in the jungle canopy.

"Fine, Mario. How are you?" I was able to say.

"Oh, fair to middling." He reached for a fresh doily to place under my glass, but stopped in mid-reach, squinting at me. Suddenly he turned pale and leaned back on the stool. "Oh, my God."

"It's been a long time," I said, choking back tears.

"Oh, my God," he repeated. "Please, God, don't let this be a dream, not some cruel dream." A neon beer sign reflected off the tears streaming down his face. "I thought you were dead." He started sobbing.

The other patrons and bartenders looked on in stunned, embarrassed silence.

"You sonofabitch," he moaned, then looked at me in anger. "You *sonofabitch*!" He grabbed my arms and shook. "Where the fuck have you *been*?"

"In a hospital like you. You have no idea what I had to do to find you." I began to sob and rubbed my fingers through his short hair.

He looked at me and cupped my face in his large hands. "Oh, God, *Pring! I can't believe ou're alive!*"

I turned to the bartender who had served me. "Where is his coat?"

The stupefied bartender reached for a coat on a hook behind the bar and handed it to me.

I pulled the hinged section up and helped Mario into his coat and wheelchair as he stared in awe at me. It was as if he was still not sure if I was real.

"You can tell his cousin that he won't be coming back." I announced. "Tell him we'll send him a postcard."

As the last of the customers and the two bartenders looked on with a mixture of confusion and shock, I pushed Mario out of the bar and into the cold night.

"Where are we going?" he asked, trying to make eye contact.

Spotting a gap in the traffic, I rushed Mario across Mannheim Road rather than answer his question.

"Jesus Christ!" he yelled, watching in horror at the swiftly moving cars approaching from both directions. I'm sure he suddenly wondered if I had lost my mind.

Scrambling up the icy entrance to the motel, I began to laugh, whereupon he tentatively joined in. "We're going here . . . for the time being." I squeezed his shoulders. "You okay?"

"A rapid heartbeat, thanks to that little crossing experience, but I'm okay, I guess." He succeeded in catching my gaze, then righted himself as we went through the motel entrance. "I was sort of wondering what happened to the sweet, cautious, mild-mannered Amerasian I knew."

"You mean the 'hysterical faggot who was going to get us both killed'?" I pushed him into the open elevator and pressed the button, staring down the bellboy who was scrutinizing us. "He's not here any more. I guess we both have some changes to get used to."

The elevator door closed.

"I'm sorry for saying that to you. I . . . "

"I'm sorry you *had* to say it," I interrupted. "I've since found out that I'm not the pacifist I thought I was."

He looked up at me questioningly as the door opened.

I wheeled him into the motel room and double-locked the door. Turning around, I found that he'd wheeled himself to the foot of the far bed. We stared at each other from across the room.

I felt so many strong, diverse emotions that I was unable to say anything. I was delirious that he was alive and had not deceived me. But I was distraught that he was now without his powerful legs. I felt as if I wanted to mutilate Nick all over again.

He broke the silence. "You look good." He glanced down in shame. "Are you off the drugs?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I don't even drink that much any more."

I looked at where his legs should have been. "How did he do it?"

He sighed heavily, probably reluctant to relive the experience. "He told me to drive slowly behind you as you walked to the train. After you and Nick's Burmese 'client' boarded, he told me to drive down to a dark section near the tracks. The way he was talking, I thought maybe he'd had a change of heart. He talked about Mom and Dad and how he had so much planned for me. He even started to cry. But all I could think of was getting to Bridgehampton before you. So I grabbed for Nick's pistol. God, I came so fucking close." He closed his eyes tightly, then opened them with a look of hatred. "I wanted to kill the motherfucker . . . and I would have if . . . " He sighed and looked sadly at his lower torso. "He wrestled the gun away and hit me over the head with it. He was so enraged, man. He was yelling at the top of his voice and kept hitting me with his fists. He dragged me out of the car and pulled me up across the express tracks. I kept slipping in and out of consciousness, but I knew that I had to get off those tracks. I heard the train coming, and I looked up at Nick, standing by the car. I pleaded with him to help me, but he just got inside . . . just drove off and left me there. I started crawling . . . but . . . "

I tried to imagine it and felt nauseated. For the first time, I allowed the memory of Nick's death to surface. I felt soothed in some perverse way by the memory.

"We have so much to talk about. So many unanswered questions," Mario said.

"Yeah," I said, taking off my wind breaker, sweater and .45 with holster, then throwing them on the near bed.

Mario looked with surprise at the pistol. Then his expression darkened, as if he knew why I'd brought it. "You go first," he said, his eyes brimming with more tears.

I sat on the edge of the bed near him, placing my hand on his. "You probably read about it."

"Yeah, but it read like some pro got hold of Cosotro and Nick. I thought that you must have been fingered and killed. You mean to tell me you did all that?" He glanced again at the .45.

I panicked as I realized how I'd traumatized Denise, but I just couldn't figure out another way with Mario. He had to be told everything, and I had to know everything from him. "Yes, I did all that . . . and *more*." I searched his expression. "You want to know why I turned into a monster? It had to do with *survival . . . and getting you back*. Nothing else mattered."

"And the forty-five? Why is it here now?" His eyes were red and puffy.

"Because life wouldn't be worth it without Mario—the Mario I fell in love with." I shuddered as I could no longer hold back the tears. "The Mario here right now." Somehow I picked him up, falling on the bed with him. We lay facing each other,

and I kissed his eyes, his nose, his lips.

He looked worried. "Pring, I'm not the same man physically. It might take some getting used to."

I unbuttoned his coat and shirt, exposing his exquisite chest and hardening nipples. "No, it won't. You've got the same wonderful eyes, the same dimple." I touched it lovingly. "Nothing has changed except you're minus those two extraordinary legs, which I'll miss around my neck for . . . " I gulped, searching his eyes. "Oh, my God. Not . . . " I slowly reached for his cock.

He laughed. "No, the choo-choo didn't get the crown jewels."

"Oh, thank God!" I celebrated by unbuttoning the rest of his shirt and unbuckling his modified trousers. He suddenly ripped open my shirt and placed his hot chest against mine, drawing my breath away. He licked my lips with his tongue, probing between them.

"I should go and brush my teeth," I suggested.

"I haven't had a shower since this morning," he said, escalating his kissing.

"Me neither," I whispered, releasing myself to him.

Writhing atop the mass of torn and disheveled clothing, we jointly reached a threshold, beyond which nothing unpleasant could be sensed. My stress-soured mouth wasn't even noticed. His moderate body ripeness certainly wasn't. All that mattered was that we'd survived, however altered, and found each other.

Without the distortion of the drugs, I found that Mario's chemistry triggered some natural secretion which had an even greater aphrodisiac effect. Again, the universe seemed to consist only of our immediate surroundings. Our bodies, minds and essences merged. It felt as if we were inside that cozy cocoon again. There was no rush to passion. It was as if there had been no separation.

As he slowly sucked my cock, I caressed his stumps, marveling over how cleanly they had amputated his legs just below his scrotum. I saw that there was little muscle tone in his lower extremities and realized the effects of severing all those leg muscles that normally extended into the torso. I felt the softness of his lower abdomen and thighs, then sensed his sudden tension as he realized what I was doing. My cock slipped out of his mouth. I began to lick the concentration of nerve endings and conjoined flesh at the suture point. Sure enough, I'd not miscalculated the effect, for it drove him wild.

We slowly deep-throated one another, seeking to tap that nectar I'm sure neither of us had spilled since our last encounter. There was no holding back; our semen flowed simultaneously without the fanfares of cries or warnings. It rushed copiously and was received with gratitude, love, relief and a host of other emotions.

Drained and glowing, we lay side-by-side staring dumbly at the ceiling.

"Thank God for Denise," Mario said at length.

"Denise?"

"I'm so grateful that she told you where I was."

The words took time to sink in. "What?"

"Denise." He frowned at my confusion. "Didn't she tell you . . . ? He propped himself up and shook his head. "She didn't tell you? Then who . . . ?"

I must have turned pale.

"I first talked to her from the hospital. It was after I was moved to a room after the surgery. I remembered that she did that astrology column for the *Globe*, so I called her. She told me about searching all the hospitals, but then she said that she *psychically* knew that you were dead. Ever since that night she had dinner with us, I knew she was against us coming together. That night, she told me that we were star-crossed—that one of us would be responsible for the death of the other."

The betrayal sliced into me like a white-hot, dull knife. "When did you call her and tell her you were here in Chicago?"

He thought about it. "Oh, about three, four weeks ago the first time. The last time I called her was about five days ago."

"I see," I said, holding Denise's actions in abeyance, retrieving the glow again. After all, our juices had just begun to flow!

TWENTY

Christmas Eve, New York

I had been afraid that the revelation about the full extent of my wealth would intimidate Mario or somehow change our relationship, but it didn't. When I told him, he shrugged. Granted, he knew that I had a Swiss bank account because of the letter he'd opened from my Zürich bank, but he had no idea just how much money I had. But after buying him a state-of-the-art, collapsible wheelchair, then flying first class flight to New York and checking into a suite at the Waldorf, he became suspicious.

We had an elegant room service breakfast, then we dressed and joined the multitude of last-minute Christmas shoppers. We had so much to do. I wanted to pick up a substantial amount of traveler's checks and cash at Chase Manhattan and buy Mario a diamond ring; Mario wanted to retrieve his beloved Corvette from the Sambucco's. And, of course, we couldn't leave New York without giving Denise our parting shots. We therefore decided to start off the day with a surprise visit to her office at the newspaper.

I had no intention of being really nasty to her. After all, she'd loved me and cared for me at one time, and I'm sure that she was sincere in her belief that Mario and I shouldn't be together. As planned, Mario gave me a one-minute head start, and I walked into her cubicle. In spite of a festive holiday mood all around her, she was engrossed in her work and had her back to the entrance.

"I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want first?"

She whirled around and stared at me. Recognizing me, she smiled and stood to greet me but never came forward to hug me like all the times before. I studied her eyes, which projected ambivalence and perhaps a little fear. "It's so good to see you, Pring."

"The good news or the bad," I repeated coolly.

"The bad, I suppose," she said nervously, glancing around to see who was listening.

"No, you'll have to hear the good news first. You'll understand when I tell you. Your prediction came true after all. I've met the man of my dreams."

She smiled, but there was still an undercurrent of fear. "I'm so very happy for you, Pring. Who's the lucky guy?"

I listened as the whirling sound of Mario's wheelchair got closer. "Well, that's the bad news, at least as far as you're concerned." I stepped aside as Mario stopped his wheelchair next to me.

"Hello, Denise," he greeted.

Denise turned pale and sat down rigidly in her chair.

I lay an unsigned twenty thousand dollar check on her desk. "I made it out two weeks ago, but never got around to

signing it. I wanted to sign it in front of you." I tore it in half and dropped the pieces back on her desk. "I'm also taking you out of my will."

She looked at the pieces and shook her head, a small smile etched on her lips. "This isn't bad news to me, Pring," she said softly. "I loved you as a hard-working, gullible associate editor of a dinky trade magazine. I'm surprised at your vindictiveness." She smiled. "Granted, I interfered in your life and tried to keep you two apart, but you have to admit that my predictions were pretty accurate. You almost died, Pring." She looked at Mario. "You look as if you came pretty close yourself . . . and I almost bought it under the wheels of a speeding car. And, please, let's not forget poor Tony." She turned and continued working on her column. "Perhaps my predictions came closer than you think."

Cheated of my revenge, I wheeled Mario out of her office.

"Oh, by the way!" she called after me. "There's a story my journalist friend is following up on. The Amagansett police found two young guys in a beach cottage last week. Some woman was walking her dog in the dunes and told police about seeing a man in a hooded jacket coming out of the house after seven shots were fired. The house belonged to our deceased *capo*, Cosotro. One man was dead. The other one had six .38 slugs in his chest, but he's hanging on. The NYPD is just dying to hear his first words when he's well enough, but my friend says that he probably won't tell them anything. He'll probably save it for the Tringili family."

"Which hospital?" I asked, glancing at an ashen-faced Mario. "What's his condition?"

Denise nodded at the check pieces and grinned. "There's a Chase Manhattan just across the street. Why don't we just go over there get your change of heart . . . certified?"

I knew that all she had to do was make a telephone call, and we'd never make it out of New York City. I nodded.

Pushing Mario in the wheelchair, I followed her to the Chase Manhattan branch across the street from the newspaper. As Mario and Denise waited, I got in a long line and eventually purchased a certified check for twenty thousand dollars made out to Denise. With what was left in the account, just over eighteen thousand, I purchased another certified check made out to myself.

After handing Denise her certified check, she smiled triumphantly. "He's in East Hampton Providence Hospital. Last I heard, he was listed as critical but stable. He could start singing at any time."

"But, of course, *you* won't. Will you, Denise?" My voice and expression made her visibly shudder.

"No," she said, her voice almost cracking with fear.

Mario and I watched as she turned and walked out of our lives forever. Worried that she might make her threatened calls out of spite, I rushed Mario to a pay phone to call Bruno Sambucco.

Judging from Mario's side of the conversation, Bruno's wife had answered and seemed overjoyed to hear from him.

Taking a chance that it was safe, we took a cab to the Sambucco home and found Bruno away. As Mrs. Sambucco wept at the sight of the reunited father and his "long-lost, illegitimate son," we said hasty good-byes and got inside the Corvette. As I got the sports car to groan to a start after weeks of neglect, Bruno Sambucco pulled into the driveway.

I reached for the .45, but realized that it was inside my suitcase in the hotel in Manhattan.

"Take it easy," soothed Mario. "Let me do the talking."

Bruno cautiously approached the passenger side, then grinned as he recognized Mario. Bending over, he spotted me and frowned. "Mario, he really is . . . ?"

"That's right, Bruno. He's my son. Hey, thanks for keeping White Lightning for me."

Bruno nodded, but he couldn't keep his eyes off me. "Where you goin'? Stay for dinner." He glanced up at his wife, who was still crying. "Annie, these boys are hungry!"

"We can't, Bruno," said Mario anxiously. "We have to get on the road."

Bruno knelt so that he could be more discreet. "Then just give me five minutes in private, okay?" He looked at me.

Mario turned to me and nodded, so I got out of the car and walked a few feet away.

I began to feel dizzy from the mounting tension and groaned as Mario's expression paled.

Mrs. Sambucco and I glanced at each other. It was obvious that she had no idea what they were talking about any more than I did.

A short time later, Bruno hugged Mario and walked toward his wife. He was crying.

I got behind the wheel and frantically looked for a message in Mario's expression. "Well?"

Mario nodded for me to get going, and I drove out of the driveway to the corner stop sign.

"I'm afraid you've been had," Mario announced.

I turned the corner and drove toward Manhattan. "By whom?"

"Denise."

"Tell me."

"Jimmy, the guy you called Scarface, was fingered as the hit man for both Cosotro and Nick. The Tringili family found out about Cosotro's private life and Nick's gambling debts and figured that Scarface was trying to impress a rival family into taking him in. They put a contract out on him, but no one knew where the cottage was." Mario grinned. "He's not at East Hampton Providence, hot lips. He's six feet under, thanks to you, but you don't even get credit for it. Some Tringili numbers runner swears he killed the two punks, and now he's a big hero with the family."

"Denise, you . . . you *cunt*," I spat. But I was ambivalent. On the one hand, I was really pissed over being taken for twenty grand, but I had to admire the way she did it.

"So how about we get rid of those two pieces you have in your suitcase," said Mario, "and you can go back to being a sweet, gentle Amerasian again."

"We'll see," I said, dismissing the subject. "So where do you want to go after we celebrate our first Christmas together?"

"Let's go to California," he recommended. "Maybe we'll run into Kim and Frank . . . and I can apologize for being so rude."

"Sounds like a winner," I said, exhilarated, determined to give Mario back the sweet, gentle Amerasian he fell in love with.

The exterminating angel—the part of me who knew Saturn—would just have to stay in the wings.

THE END

IN CLOSING

THE NOVEL

Normally we are elated if our special issues sell over 1,000 copies, but this time we will sell closer to 8,000. You'll notice one reason: we trimmed it down and radically lowered the cover price. But mostly it's because our distributor is dispensing it to virtually every progressive bookstore, kiosk and magazine rack in the country. So, all you new readers, we bid you welcome and sincerely hope that you enjoyed the foregoing fiction. And make sure that you check out our next regular issue #50 (June 92), which will have provocative short fiction, articles, artwork and personal ads instead of a full-length novel.

Because I knew that *KNOWING SATURN* would be read by so many people, I went to greater lengths to make sure that it was the best that I could do. Researching, writing, editing and publishing a novel involve much more than just an author. It takes a team effort, and I am lucky to have the help of some of the best editors and consultants available (the errors you no doubt found are my own last minute typos). I'd like to thank (in alphabetical order) Charles Chiarelli, The Friar and The Viking for their editing and proofing skills. In addition, I would like to thank John McNeill and Eugene Wagner for their expertise in the subjects of psychotherapy, medicine and Buddhism. This issue is therefore dedicated to these five gentlemen.

We would very much like feedback on these novels and ask that you drop us a line and tell us what type of novel you'd like to see in the next few specials. For those of you who prefer less violence, our November special issue will feature something a little more light-hearted than the last four. We will use one of the following:

1. A fully edited and revamped version of my first novel, *BARNEY*, which was originally published in 1988. BARNEY is the story of a 60ish widower who comes out late in life and hits the road in search of Mr. Right. As one of my fans said, "*BARNEY* is a sexual cross-country romp with plenty of humor and pathos."

2. A novel based on a play I wrote back in 1984. *BYRON SWEET* will feature a seemingly washed-up ventriloquist who gets a second chance at life when he meets a young DEA agent who is running from both the Colombian drug cartel and the DEA. It will be a romance/adventure yarn in the spirit of "Romancing The Stone" and will blast its way from Los Angeles to Mexico to the jungles of Venezuela and back. The novel will require some on-site research, so a decision must be made soon.

We eagerly await your comments.

THE MODELS

As you may have noticed, this issue is rather loaded with the photography of JOEL and his Idaho models. We can't say enough about how much JOEL and THOM have done for us. Since JOEL met THOM, he seems to have a fire lit under him, and he's determined to become the finest erotic photographer in the world. It is utterly amazing how many new models he's brought us. Mark our words, this young man will go far. He's driven, and we can't wait until he starts photographing his way through California.

There's a soft spot in both our hearts for Australia. The FRIAR and I hope to be flying down that way for a little R & R next year. Australia is sort of an enigma to us. We don't have very many subscribers there, but those we do have are fiercely loyal. Virtually all of them are models, writers or artists who contribute from time to time to CR. Most have been with us for over four years. This magnificent country should be a gold mine for us as soon as we finally break the ice and become well-known. Our distributor tells us that they will be including that part of the world in their plans for us very shortly.

THE CONFERENCE

PAPA BEAR, who lives north of San Francisco in the Russian River area, has allowed us to throw our first contributor "conference" at his place. On May 30, a group of CR models, writers, artists, photographers, videographers, editors, consultants and cofounders will converge upon "The House of a Thousand Flowers" for a one-day bash that will include a barbecue, lots of discussions, a great deal of photo and video sessions, and just a whole lot of getting to know one another. We'll tell you all about it in our June issue.

The next conference will probably be on the East Coast in '93 to make it a little easier on the equally important Eastern contributors. If that goes down all right, we'll think about doing it in the Midwest in '94.

Feel left out because you aren't a contributor? All it takes is one good photo, story, essay or drawing. Remember, everything we publish comes from guys just like you.

The Friar and I wish you all the finest of springs--one which will brighten your lives with new growth, fresh starts. May this spring bring you all good health and happiness.

Pat and The Friar

MODEL AND PHOTOGRAPHER PROFILES

(Continued from page 3)

TUCK, a landscaper, enjoys the company of hairy, uncut, older men and loves the outdoors, good food and country music. He and RAY T. are just good buddies.

ARNIE is 56, 5'-9", 200# and lives in the Atlantic Northeast. He's a bisexual nudist and a nonsmoker who seeks penpals and friends who are older.

BIG "D" is 51, 6'-2", 185# (10 of it cock) and goes exclusively for men over 60. A gentle yet rugged man, he has a deep, pleasant voice and a natural, desirable masculinity. Lots of testosterone here, fellas.

JACK, our cover model from Issue #47, lives in Central Florida and is looking for friends who want to visit Disney World and have lots of fun in other ways. JACK and his friend, Philip, look forward to hearing from new friends.

KOALA BEAR is a good buddy of model OUTBACK JACK. These two hang out together at an Australian beach where big, burly bears go to sunbathe in the nude. You should see the group photos we're not at liberty to publish!

BEAR CUB was single when we took this photo up at PAPA BEAR's place a couple of years ago, but now he's living in the Bay Area with the wonderful mature man of his dreams. They would like to meet other couples for friendship and social fun.

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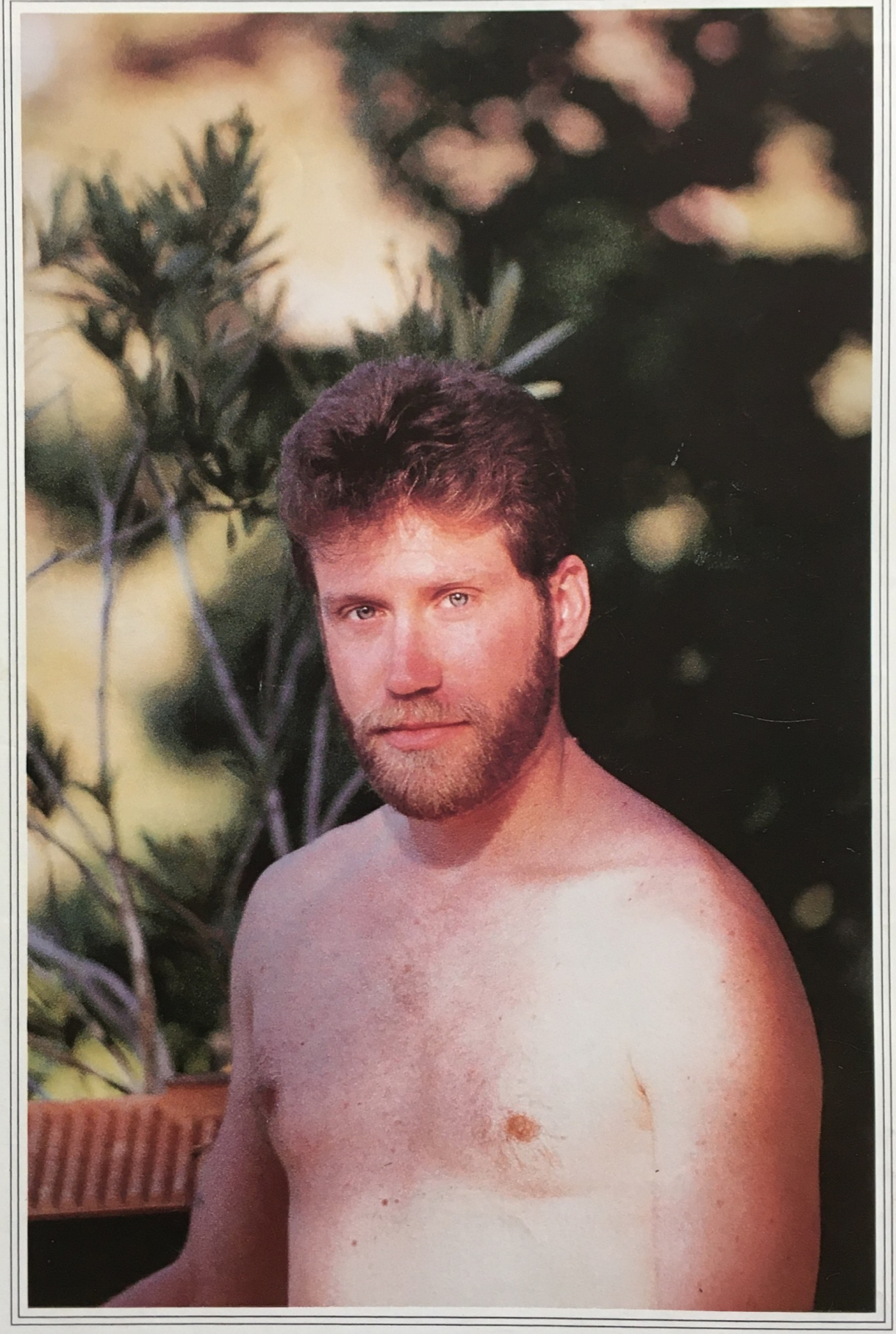
photo by OUTBACK JACK



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